Fate/Zero

Volume 2

The Mad Feast of Kings

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First Edition

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Act 5

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Situated further west than Miyama town, the winding state highway stretched westwards with its back toward the city lights. An undeveloped piece of forest awaited visitors further up the road. The state highway silently meandered on, stretching even beyond the prefectural border. Although the two-lane road was lit by sparse street lights, no passing cars could be seen. In the dead of night, the state highway seemed to fade from memory and into silence.

On this silent night, a silver beast flew by: A Mercedes-Benz 300sl Coupe. The flowing, elegant, streamlined body scented with antiquity resembled a noble lady, while the roaring of the Straight-6 sohc engine was like a fierce beast's. Behind the steering wheel of the classic sedan recklessly speeding at over 100 kilometers per hour were the slender wrists of a young lady—quite an unexpected sight.

"Hey, hey, this goes pretty fast, doesn't it?" Irisviel said, a pleased smile on her face as she held the steering wheel. A

nervous Saber, sitting in the passenger's seat, barely managed a stiff smile and a nod.

"In-indeed. This is ... rather unexpectedly ... skillful ... driving ..."

"Isn't it? I had special training, even if it seems otherwise." Despite her confident claim, her unfamiliarity with the gears demonstrated how far she was from being a proficient driver.

"Of all the toys Kiritsugu brought to the Einsbern castle, I love this one the most. In the castle grounds I could only drive in circles, but this is the first time I had the chance to drive in such spacious luxury. It's wonderful!"

"A toy, huh ..." There would be little objection to calling a skateboard or bicycle a toy, but the term was clearly mismatched for a machine speeding at more than a hundred kilometers per hour on a snaking road. Ordinarily, one would not call something a toy if the slightest mistake in its handling would put their lives in danger.

Although it was a classic sedan made more than forty years ago, it had a 2996cc M198 engine, and its top speed was 260 kilometers per hour. Irisviel's reckless roaming was merely a prelude to the car's full ability.

Emiya Kiritsugu had specially prepared the car in the Einsbern castle earlier so that, on reaching Fuyuki, Irisviel and Saber would have means of transportation other than their own two feet. For more than half a month, the car had been parked in the hotel's underground car park. Now, they were driving that precious car to the Einsberns' castle residence.

"Hmm. Wait a minute, Irisviel. Haven't you been driving on the left side until just a moment ago?"

"Ah, that's right."

Irisviel nodded casually as if it was a very small mistake, and the car gave a jerk and moved into the cruising lane. She had never been out of the Einsbern castle in her life; this was obviously her first time driving on a highway. Saber had been paying attention to her line of sight since they'd started traveling. Obviously, Irisviel did not know anything about street signs. It seemed she did not even know that driving on the left was a legal requirement. At least she could understand traffic lights somewhat, but only as far as slowing down when she saw the red light. Right now it was midnight, and there was little traffic, but it would still be a miracle if they reached their destination safely.

"... Is it still a long way to the Einsbern castle?"

"I hear it would only take an hour to reach it by car. When we get close, we should be able to see it ..."

Saber could not stop wishing for this dangerous journey to end sooner, even by only a second. It was fortunate that there were no oncoming vehicles on the midnight highway, but the winding road still posed a great danger that filled Saber's blood with adrenaline, as though right before a battle. As a Servant, she possessed extraordinary reflexes and strength, and could escape the car with Irisviel in her arms should the need arise. However, this legendary sports car, worth ten million yen, would then be reduced to an unrecognizable pile of scrap iron. That did not sit well with Saber's frugal economic sense.

"... Would it not have been better to hire a chauffeur?"

"Of course not. That would be bori—I mean, that would be *dangerous*. After all, once we are in Fuyuki City, we could be attacked by other Masters at any time. You were the one who didn't want to see innocent people being dragged into this, Saber."

"That is true . . ."

Which is more dangerous: being attacked by other Masters, or being subjected to Irisviel's driving skills? Saber was considering this question half-seriously when a cold wave pricked her senses like the edge of a blade.

"Stop the car!"

"Huh?" Irisviel had not grasped Saber's sudden warning. Saber did not have time to explain. She forcefully stretched her torso across the driver's seat, took hold of the steering wheel with one hand, and slammed her left foot toe-first on the brakes. Her skill of Riding enabled her to make the decision immediately and bring the rampaging machine under control. She had complete understanding of the controls of all ridden machines, both known and unknown to her.

Fortunately, the car maintained a straight path during the sharp braking and did not spin furiously.

The tires of the Mercedes skidded on the asphalt, emitting clouds of white smoke. As the car's uncontrollable slide continued, Saber once again confirmed the feeling that had set her nerves on edge. Without a doubt, it was definitely the scent of a Servant. Speak of the devil indeed.

"Saber, that's—"

Irisviel fell silent. A strange-looking figure emerged onto the long stretch of the road lit by the Mercedes' headlights. The tall

figure before them stood unperturbed in the middle of the road, seemingly ignorant of the danger of the speeding car. It was wrapped in a luxurious robe of ancient design, scarlet, sanguine patterns adorning the pitch-black fabric. The abnormally huge eyes brought to mind images of nocturnal animals. Bizarre observations aside, no ordinary passerby would be appearing in such a place at this time.

The friction of the wheels finally overcame the car's momentum, and the Mercedes stopped. There was barely ten meters between the car and the figure in front of it.

"... Saber?"

Saber quickly analyzed the situation, then said to Irisviel, "Get out of the car when I do, but don't go too far."

If the opponent was a Servant, a car and its steel frame would be as fragile as a cardboard box. They would be defenseless if they remained inside. It would be safer to get out and seek a more defensible position. Saber opened the gull-wing door and stepped out into the frigid night. The acrid stench of burnt tire rubber mixed with the smell from trees, rustled by the night wind. The figure before her eyes was unlike the five she had seen before. If it was a Servant she had not met yet, it could only be Caster, or perhaps Assassin ...

Saber and Irisviel—unaware of the ruse that had occurred in the Tousaka residence the other night—could not eliminate the possibility that it was Assassin, but this Servant, neither running nor hiding but standing proudly in front of them, certainly did not seem like him. By elimination, there was only one conclusion—the figure before them was Caster.

However, was that expression on his face really the expression of a warrior about to do battle? The confused King of Knights surveyed the opponent's countenance once again. He was smiling, which was understandable; it was not uncommon for a warrior to be filled with joy at facing death in a place of their choosing. But that was not Caster's particular expression. It was as though they were long-lost brothers finally reunited; a face shining so purely with delight it was almost childish. Before the unnerved Saber could challenge his identity, Caster acted, foiling her estimations. He bowed his head deferentially and knelt down on the asphalt road, like a courtier presenting himself before a king.

"I have been waiting, Your Majesty, the Holy Maiden."

"Huh?" Saber felt more and more lost in this situation. Although she had once been a king and had accepted genuflection from countless lords and heroes, she had no memory of the man before her eyes. This man was not one of her former subjects from Camelot.

In the first place, the title "Holy Maiden" was strange indeed. When she governed Britain as King Arthur, she never exposed the fact that she was in truth a woman, even at the end. Irisviel, who had gotten out of the Mercedes after a while, hid behind Saber, who nervously kept her guard up and silently observed Caster.

"Saber, do you know this person?"

"No, I have no impression of him—"

Hearing Saber's and Irisviel's murmurs, Caster lifted his head and said: "... Oh, oh, how can you say that? Don't you remember me?"

Saber grew increasingly astonished at his exaggerations. "Whatever you may say, this is the first time I have met you—I do not know where the mistake lies, but . . . perhaps you've got the wrong person?"

"Oh oh . . ." Caster began to sob with great apparent anguish, clawing his hair with his hands. His expression of delight changed completely, giving way to dismay and dejection, which twisted his strange, greasy complexion like a caricature. He seemed a dangerous man whose emotions changed on a whim. "It's me! I am, now and forever, your most royal servant, Gilles de Rais! I've always prayed for your resurrection, always waited for the miraculous day when I could meet you again. I came here, to the ends of time, for that purpose, Jeanne!"

Hearing the man's words, Irisviel caught her breath. "Gilles de Rais . . .?"

This was the second Servant to declare his real name before them. Although his purpose was unknown, the name was indeed the renowned title given to Caster in the current world. For Saber, doubt hardened into denial once his origin was clear.

"I do not know your name, nor do I know of this person named Jeanne."

Sighing in apparent shock at Saber's declaration, Caster stammered, wheezing, "What . . .? Could it be that you have forgotten who you were in mortal life?!"

Saber was getting annoyed with this situation; she could not get her point across clearly. Regarding Caster grimly, she said: "Since you have declared your name, I will, according to a

knight's decorum, tell you my true name as well. I am Arturia, the rightful child of Uther Pendragon, and the King of Britain."

Caster, lost for words, stared in blank amazement at this girl in front of him, who stuck her chest out and proudly declared her name. And then—"Oh! Oh!" He began to weep in fits, almost shrieking, while hammering the ground with his fists in an unsightly manner. "How painful, how tragic this is! Not only is her memory lost, even her mind is befuddled... You ... You! God, why are you so cruel to this lovely maiden of mine?"

"What are you talking about? To begin with, I am not—"

"Jeanne, I understand why you won't admit it. You, who were more devoted to God and believed in Him more deeply than anyone else, were instead abandoned by God. When you were sentenced and executed as a witch, God rendered no help or salvation. It is not without reason that you are now acting in this way."

Saber suddenly felt a repulsive feeling completely unlike fear. Every single hair in her body seemed to be standing on end. TheIs man before her was not hearing her words at all; he never wanted to hear them in the first place. He had come to this conclusion based on his own delusions about Saber, and he had no doubts about his conclusion. Under the control of this train of thoughts, Caster took in none of Saber's words.

"Wake up! Jeanne! You need not be bewildered by the likes of God! You are the Holy Maiden of Orleans, the savior of France—Jeanne d'Arc!"

"That is enough! This is unsightly!" Saber shouted, no longer confused or showing restraint, disgust toward the kneeling Caster

in open display. "I am Saber, and you are Caster, a Heroic Spirit. We are both Servants who fight for the Grail. That is all there is to our meeting here; nothing more and nothing less."

"... Saber, there's no point in saying anything to this man."

Irisviel rebuked the agitated King of Knights from behind. Saber—rather, Arturia—was an incomplete Heroic Spirit, and hence did not possess the knowledge surpassing time and space that those who reached the Throne of Heroes gained. Therefore, she did not know the tale of the one tainted by insanity, the legend of "Bluebeard," Baron Gilles de Rais.

Gilles de Rais had risen to the position of general as a savior and hero of France, but he turned his back on glory when he indulged in the immorality and lust of black magic. He was the "monstre sacré" who eventually slaughtered hundreds of youths. Gilles's descent into madness occurred at about the same time as the fateful end of the valiant Jeanne d'Arc, whom he had fought alongside. As such, many legends have connected the two. The deep-rooted delusion held by the Heroic Spirit called forth by the Grail, Gilles de Rais, could only be madness. It was impossible to know just how similar Arturia and Jeanne d'Arc were, but they must have been very similar indeed. In any case, Gilles—no, *Caster*—already firmly believed Saber to be the person in his thoughts, and did not allow a shadow of doubt to distract him from that.

"Jeanne, please stop referring to yourself as Saber, or to me as Caster. We will soon be free from the bindings of this shackle of servitude called Servanthood. The Holy Grail War is about to end!"

"That is just your own wishful thinking." This time it was Irisviel who answered on behalf of Saber, who was already too angry to speak.

"General de Rais, since you say the war is already over, what of the Grail?"

"It is obvious; the omnipotent Grail, that wish-granting machine, is already in my hands!" Caster declared proudly, a satisfied smile on his face. "My only wish was that the Holy Maiden Jeanne d'Arc would be resurrected, and now this wish had already been fulfilled! Without the need to compete, my wish has already come true! The Grail has already chosen me—Gilles—with nary a fight!"

Ding! A shrill sound reverberated. The asphalt before Caster's eyes split perfectly into two.

It was Saber's invisible sword. Although Caster could not see it, he could feel the aura of the sharp blade right at the tip of his nose.

"If you continue to ridicule the wishes of us Heroic Spirits, I will cut you down without mercy, Caster." Saber's words were free of emotions, her voice as cold as the blade.

"Come, rise. A knight will not attack one who is kneeling on the ground. If you are also a soldier, keep your cunning arguments to yourself and take the Grail in direct battle. I, Saber, shall be your first opponent!"

The mad flame in Caster's eyes disappeared. His face, twisted with excitement, gradually returned to a calm state. Caster lifted his head to look at Saber; the formidable will harbored in that gaze

did not change in the slightest. It was a look of silent resolution; He had merely changed his determination into even firmer belief.

"It seems mere words will not be enough. Is your heart still sealed, Jeanne?" Caster's gloomy voice no longer contained his earlier lament. "Then I am very sorry. It seems there's a need to force therapy upon you. Whatever happens, I will definitely complete all the preparations for you next time."

The long black robe floated backwards abruptly, creating a gaping distance between Saber and himself. Caster, standing up again, was practically a different person from the sobbing figure kneeling on the ground just then. A great air of majestic command now emanated from him; he seemed capable of staining the entire earth red with blood. Not only Heroic Spirits, but even tyrants would feel the oppressive tension of fear. The man in front of her was undoubtedly not an easy enemy—Saber, standing before Caster, instinctively knew this.

"I swear to you, Jeanne. The next time we meet, I will definitely . . . save your soul from the curse of God."

"Save your words. Leave if you have not the will to command a sword."

Following Saber's cold reply, Caster silently cancelled his material form and disappeared into the night.

With a long sigh, Saber's tension abated. Irisviel collapsed onto the fender of the Mercedes, exhausted.

"Confronting such a senseless opponent . . . was rather tiresome."

"Right. However, I'm going to chop him up before he opens his mouth next time. I'd throw up if someone like him stayed a

minute longer." Though Caster had already left, Saber still said it indignantly.

"You regret how he escaped so easily?"

"Uh huh. I was about to make him pay for his nonsense—was what I wanted to say." For a brief moment, meekness covered her anger as Saber furrowed her brows reluctantly. "But, in all honesty, Caster's retreat was probably lucky for me on such a night."

"Oh? Really?" Irisviel was surprised to hear such uncertain words from Saber.

For an opponent as skilled in thaumaturgical battle as Caster, his bane would have been Saber, who had the strongest magic resistance. If the duo started fighting, Saber should achieved victory easily with her overwhelming advantage. But Saber shook her head with a bitter smile. Even she did not completely understand the expression on her face.

"That Caster . . . was a bit different. He is not quite the same as the other magi. I cannot be sure . . . but it felt too dangerous for me to fight him in this condition, with my left hand still sealed." Her sixth sense was enhanced to an abnormal degree—a specialty of the Saber class—almost to the level of precognition. If even she felt uneasy about the enemy, Irisviel would also have to reevaluate Caster.

"In any case, Lancer should be first . . ."

"Yes. But it is extremely fortunate that Lancer is also a noble warrior, who would not try to escape or hide himself away. He is also looking forward to our duel." Although they were mutual enemies, Saber sympathised with Lancer's spirit of nobility. Even

so, Irisviel was not at ease. After all, no matter how chivalrous the Servant, the same could not be said of the Master. Yet the King of Knights, shackled as a Servant, still chose to fight on the reputation of her sword? At the thought, Irisviel could not help but feel despondent.

Unknown to Irisviel, Saber, and even Caster, who had retreated first, this chance meeting between the three had been entirely under the surveillance of a pursuer.

In the dense forest beside the state highway, the one in the ghastly skull mask concealed himself in the treetops swallowed by the darkness, and surveyed all that had just happened with a vigilant eye.

He did not merely merge with the shadows; this pursuer, who had cut off all scent in order to evade Saber's senses, seemed to be a shadow himself. None but Assassin could have achieved this. It seemed that, obeying Kotomine Kirei's command, Assassin had followed Saber and Irisviel from the warehouses to the present location.

Assassin, originally given only the mark of Irisviel, Einsbern's Master, had learned something unexpected. He had finally found the last Servant, Caster, who had not appeared in the melee at the warehouse district. Although the scent of Caster, who had departed in spirit form, was quickly fading, Assassin's sharp spiritual sense could still detect it. There would be no better opportunity for pursuit.

"Of course, that is not a task for you." A voice sounded from behind Assassin without warning. A vague outline hazily emerged

from the dim forest—it was, oddly enough, another skull mask. The masks they wore and the black, cloaked attire were identical. The second Assassin differed from the first only in shape, and *both* differed in shape and build from the Assassin who had been reconnoitering in the warehouse district. Although they were Servants of the same class, they were all clearly and unmistakably different individuals.

"Then what about leaving it to you?"

"Yes. You need only to keep following Saber and her Master. By the way, did Master Kirei observe the situation here?"

"No. Master Kirei did not share my perception." The Assassin who had initially been tailing Irisviel shook his head. It was another Assassin who had reconnoitered in the warehouse district.

The second Assassin smacked his lips when he heard this reply. "Just to be on the safe side, we should still report to Master Kirei the things that happened here."

"Leave that to me." A third voice followed. It was no longer surprising to see another white skull mask appear in the darkness. This time, it was a child-like Assassin with a shrill voice and short stature. Perhaps none of them were aware of just how many Assassins had gathered here.

Meanwhile, Irisviel and Saber hastily took to the road again. The monstrous sound of the Mercedes's engine pierced the night sky, and it sped away, roaring down the state highway. At the same moment, the three shadows nodded to each other, and they too disappeared like whirlwinds into the vast night.

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In the darkness, thick as blood, only a solitary candle flickered. The dim candlelight reflected Uryuu Ryuunosuke's handsome face.

Scarlet blood had completely smeared these fingers too delicate for a man. Before the man, who sat beside a long table, three rows of raw meat were placed, reflecting a bright red glimmer under the light.

They were intestines. On the long table were human intestines.

Ryuunosuke stared intently at the intestines in front of him, then picked up a tuning fork with his left hand and hit it on the edge of the table. *Ding*—the tuning fork emitted a clear sound. Before the clear sound of the tuning fork completely attenuated, he quickly poked the intestines everywhere with his right hand.

Ahhh . . . Haaa . . . Agonized sounds suddenly came from the darkness. Ryuunosuke listened carefully to the sound, and nodded satisfactorily after he compared it with the residual echo of the tuning fork.

"Very good. So it's 'mi' at this spot."

As he spoke, he marked a point on the intestines with a pin. On those incessantly quivering intestines, many similar marks representing musical notes had already been made. The intestines seemed to still be alive. To be precise, it seems the owner of the intestines was still alive.

On the crucifix atop the long table, a girl, sobbing with pain, was tied up. A horizontal cut had been made in her abdomen, and the innards that were dragged out were being fondled with in Ryuunosuke's hand. Even Bluebeard praised Ryuunosuke for his

idea of making a living human pipe organ for playing mournful music. To prevent the chosen human instrument dying from massive blood loss or infection, Bluebeard placed a few healing and rejuvenation spells on her body, and made some special adjustments to prevent the pain from numbing her brain.

Ryuunosuke had always been frustrated by the human body's cessation of life-like activities upon encountering extreme stimulation. But now, with the help of thaumaturgy, all these earlier hurdles were readily resolved. Now, Ryuunosuke could flutter his wings of perception freely, improvising at will.

"Very good. So one more time: 'Do re mi~♪'"

Ryuunosuke hummed as he pressed on the intestine keyboard. But the sound of agony that accompanied his movement was disharmonious.

"... Hm?"

The blood-smeared organ-tuner furrowed his brows and tilted his head. Once again, he pressed on the spot he had just fine-tuned against the tuning fork. However, the sound made by the girl tied to the crucifix was completely different from the marked note. Upon deeper reflection, although the stimulation happens in the same spot, it would not guarantee a consistent moaning sound. The human instrument was fundamentally flawed in its design.

"Huh ... What a failure." Ryuunosuke sighed unhappily and scratched his head.

After the human canopy he tried hard to design yesterday, this human instrument had also ended in failure. If this frustration kept up, even Ryuunosuke would lose confidence. Just then, he

suddenly remembered what Bluebeard had told him in consolation after the failure of the canopy yesterday.

"Whatever you do, the idea is the most important. Even if the final result does not meet your expectations, what matters most is the act of challenging it."

Ryuunosuke was inspired by the words of the exalted fiend. For a youth who was never understood by anyone, a youth who created art by himself, the encouragement from these words held great meaning. Hard work was needed. Once again, Ryuunosuke recovered his morale. It would not do to be afraid of failure. Failure is the mother of success; a long journey must begin from the ground beneath his feet. He had to think progressively. It was too early to discard this human instrument. If he could find the root of the problem, he might be able to find some solution.

The moaning aside, the girl's expression of pain when he fondled the intestine he had taken out of her body was also extraordinarily alluring. It would be a waste to discard such a precious expression. The air, pregnant with the stench of blood, suddenly felt heavy, and the dense prana floating in the air thickened; the owner of this thaumaturgical workshop had returned.

"Ah, welcome back, Sir."

Appearing gradually in the candle light, Bluebeard, the Servant Caster, did not even give Ryuunosuke a glance. His emotionless face was the complete opposite of the singing and dancing expression of joy he had when he left. It seemed something unpleasant had happened while he was out. Although

Ryuunosuke was a little worried, he still could not wait to report the fruits of his research to him.

"Sir, I'm very sorry. As you said, the instrument did not work. But I—"

"—Not enough."

"Aye?" Ryuunosuke could not figure out what Bluebeard's sudden utterance meant. Leaving the shocked Ryuunosuke, Bluebeard stretched out a hand from inside the black robe, and placed it claw-like on the gasping girl tied to the crucifix.

"This much . . . It is still not enough!"

"Ah, yeah. I figured that out too . . . Huh?"

Ryuunosuke's sentence was cut halfway. Caster's spider-like fingers gradually increased their force; the girl's head was squashed to pieces in his hand, like a fruit.

"Th-this. . ."

Ryuunosuke was displeased with Bluebeard's attitude toward him. He understood that right now he was in an emotionally agitated state, and was completely ignorant of Ryuunosuke's existence.

"Oh, you abominable God, even now you still bind Jeanne's soul, unwilling to let her go! These blasphemous sacrifices are not enough!"

There was no light of reason in the eyes of Bluebeard, from whose mouth spit was flying as he roared. Although Ryuunosuke did not know what had happened, the Jeanne he spoke of must be the armored girl they saw in the crystal ball. It was probably trauma from emotional issues with his ex-girlfriend. Ryuunosuke began to pity him. Although they had not spent much time

together, Ryuunosuke knew that this odd-looking fiend before him was actually extremely simplistic emotionally.

"I must let her know that in this world, the so-called God is only a hollow myth. Saving the world—things like that are just boastful lies! The prayers of the silent lamb will never reach Heaven!"

"Hum, yes. I understand, Sir." Chiming along, Ryuunosuke obviously had no idea what Bluebeard's words meant, and he had no intention of trying to find out; he thought it vulgar to barge in on other people's emotional problems.

"Simply blaspheming God is not enough! We must also prove to the world the powerlessness of God's authority and the hypocrisy of His love! We need to prove God's inability to exercise judgment! No matter how much evil you've committed, you will not suffer God's punishment. Isn't it so, Ryuunosuke?"

"Ah, God? Ideas like that are just boring old tricks that only stupid people would believe in. Sir, you're so much cooler compared to that fake God."

"Then, let us blaspheme God even more vigorously! We will pile the sacrifices of blasphemy as high as mountains, and place this scene before her."

Ryuunosuke contemplated Bluebeard's declaration for a moment.

"Um, that means . . . we're gonna go beyond what we're doing right now in quality and quantity?"

"Yes, exactly! You're indeed Ryuunosuke! You understood very well what I meant." Bluebeard clapped Ryuunosuke's shoulder, acknowledging his comprehension with a beaming

smile. Ryuunosuke had long gotten used to the extreme changes in his temperament. However, he had absolutely no interest in the change of methods Bluebeard spoke of earlier.

"Ryuunosuke, how many children are still locked in the cells?"

"... There are eleven of them still alive. Three died when I played with them a little."

"Very good. Start with those eleven; sacrifice them as soon as possible. When we're finished with them, we'll capture other children to replace them before tomorrow morning."

"That's ... a bit of a pity." After all, mass slaughter was not to Ryuunosuke's taste. He enjoyed the art of killing, but was not a killing machine. Such acts did not savor the enjoyment of the kill, but only piled mountains of corpses; they were not much different from wars or natural disasters. It was a waste of lives. Only by slaughtering people one by one could you experience the wonders of life. Bluebeard perceived Ryuunosuke's discontent. With an angelic smile on his face, he started reasoning with Ryuunosuke as one would with a naughty child.

"Say, Ryuunosuke, this isn't the time to be stingy. Every life in this world is our property. Therefore you need to have the right attitude, and a heart as generous as a king. Feel free to waste. Do remember: your wealth is never going to run out. Only then are you fit to be called my Master."

"Like a king?"

Yes. Ryuunosuke was very rich. He was not even remotely interested in things like currency. For him, the only thing with expendable value was human life. He, who had obtained Bluebeard's help, would not be persecuted by the law no matter

how he killed. He was free to kill whenever he liked, wherever he liked, using whatever method he liked. These powers had been granted to him by Bluebeard. If one could do anything one desired, and waste in any manner one desired the things of this world, one effectively owns all those things. Even the Pope and the President could not compare. Uryuu Ryuunosuke was the richest man in the world.

"But I still think we should plan how we use it."

"Ryuunosuke, you've been poisoned too deeply by this capitalist society. Living in this era, it is inevitable that you have such thoughts. But you need to know that for nobles, waste is a virtue. Someone who possesses wealth has a duty to exhibit his wealth to the world. Only by doing that can you show the brilliance of wealth and make it more meaningful."

"Hum . . ."

Bluebeard's few words completely convinced Ryuunosuke. This master of death and destruction once again received new inspiration. As Bluebeard had said, he would just concentrate on getting rid of those kids tonight. Perhaps he could find some new ways to play in this short time period. Ryuunosuke became more excited as he thought about this. But even so—

Although he had accepted Bluebeard's argument, Ryuunosuke could not forget the figure of the girl who had served as the human instrument. Her face—now squashed by Bluebeard and no longer visible—was actually quite cute.

– 149:47:12

Looking down from the thirty-second floor—the top floor—of Fuyuki's Hyatt hotel, one would sense that there is no taller building in all of Fuyuki. Though that title would soon go to the Shinto shopping center that was still being built, the Hyatt remains the tallest completed building at the moment.

As Shinto grew unstoppably, there would be more and more new hotels. But the Hyatt hotel, which has the most advanced facilities and best service standards, would not give up this status to any other. This was not solely the opinion of the hotel's managers and staff; even its customers were amazed by the Hyatt's quality of service and management.

However, not even the luxury of the hotel room could ease the depression of Kayneth Archibald El-Melloi, sitting in the real leather sofa by the window. To him, the items in the room were merely chaff; a somber room, some expensive furniture, and fancy everyday decorations. Of all the things that Kayneth, a man born into aristocracy, could not stand, ordinary things fancily frilled up in a false show of aristocracy topped the list. This hotel room was the very definition of that. There was not the slightest bit of historical background or cultural heritage to this room. It was merely a pigsty, draped in an appearance of luxury.

The hotel was not the sole cause of his sour mood; the small island nation known as Japan was filled with things that left an unpleasant taste. Even tiny Hong Kong had a very local feel of folk culture. Fuyuki's Shinto, on the other hand, did not show

even a bit of its local culture. Overlooking the city's night scene, one would have no way of guessing which city or which country one was in. A mere collection of the most common items put together—if he were asked which city this is, Kayneth could only say it was a mountainous pile of rubbish.

If this easternmost island nation had preserved its original, honest backwater fishing village setting, it would be far more interesting than it was at the moment. Unfortunately, the Japanese would not be able to grasp the idea. This undeveloped country, which just a hundred years ago did not even have a constitution, was relying solely on science, technology and financial development to compete with western countries. Did they think they could unabashedly force their way into the ranks of developed countries in this manner? It would indeed be very difficult to reason with these people.

Kayneth tapped his head and sighed irately. His annoyance was causing a slight headache. He was not the type of person to get upset over small things like these; his irritation was catalysed by something else.

The wide-screen TV in front of him suddenly ceased its late night program and began broadcasting urgent news. On the live feed, the newscaster at the scene was reporting an explosion on a warehouse street by the coastline of Fuyuki, its cause as yet unknown.

According to nearby residents who heard the explosion, fire trucks had been at the scene since four hours ago. Although there was no news yet, the police investigating on-site were definitely covering up their findings. How could the ignorant masses be

capable of making correct judgment on things surpassing their knowledge?

Being the supervisor of the Holy Church was no simple task. Yet, within thirty minutes after Kayneth canceled the bounded field, the cover-up was complete. Now, the complete truth resided only in the memories of the few who had been present. One of them was Kayneth—Master of Lancer, the Heroic Spirit Diarmuid ua Duibhne. The beginning of the long-awaited Heaven's Feel, the first battle which he had thoroughly prepared for, turned out quite unlike his expectations.

Even in his youth, Kayneth Archibald had been more outstanding than his peers. No matter what the problem was, nobody could find a solution better than Kayneth's; he had no competition whatsoever. But his effort did not go beyond his ordinary sense of purpose. He believed his research results would be better than those of others, place and time notwithstanding; that was all there was to it.

Because of this, Kayneth had been considered a prodigy since his youth. It was ubiquitous. Nobody doubted his title of prodigy, nothing threatened his position as prodigy. There was no need for pride or ego; he could enjoy his deserved title as prodigy unchallenged. He had never been in a tight spot, nor had he experienced undue frustration. In young Kayneth's world, he was undoubtedly master of everything. He was a talented magus prodigy. He was also the heir of the renowned Archibald family. Not only did he inherit the magic crest passed down through the generations, he himself possessed talent rarely witnessed in the world; the honors he received were matter-of-fact. In this light,

Kayneth's belief that there was nothing in the world his power could not achieve was not unfounded. The mistake lay not with Kayneth, but with the flawed thinking of those around him.

In the ever-busy Clock Tower, his crowning with the famous title of Lord El-Melloi was met with overwhelming approval even among its numerous, successful researchers. But Kayneth, who had gotten used to being called a prodigy, who had always been the target of admiration and jealousy, did not feel the slightest twinge of satisfaction or accomplishment. To him, it was the inevitable result in life. It had been that way in the past, and would stay that way in the future. This was one of life's sacred and inviolable agreements; Kayneth had no doubt about that.

To him, one who could predict the entire world's outcome, a near-impossible accident constituted the kind of chaos that Kayneth absolutely could not tolerate. It was an insult, a blasphemy to God's order. For instance—the Servant, Saber, escaping so easily when she had clearly been caught in his palm; such unspeakable inconceivability.

"Lancer, come."

"—Yes. I await your orders."

As soon as the words left his mouth, the handsome Heroic Sprit appeared before Kayneth obediently and respectfully, stooped in a bow. For Kayneth, the main lecturer on spirit-conjuring, speaking directly to the spiritual form was familiar practice and posed no difficulty. But a face-to-face conversation like this was very rare. With his Servant facing him, Kayneth could observe minute changes in his expression while conversing.

Though, rather than a conversation, this might be more fittingly called an interrogation instead.

"Thank you for your hard work tonight. I was able to witness very well the might of Diarmuid ua Duibhne's two spears."

"Thank you, Master."

Lancer replied simply and frankly. He felt no pride from the compliment, nor did he show any telltale signs of happiness or dissatisfaction. He merely accepted it with the stringent humility of a knight.

But Kayneth's eyes could tell that this definitely was not Lancer's usual expression—he was hiding something.

"Please answer my question honestly. What do you plan to do?"

"... What, what do you mean?" Faced with Kayneth's sudden interrogation, Lancer remained cautious.

"Lancer, you swore yourself to me as a Servant: To do everything in your power to help me attain victory in Heaven's Feel. Is that right?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"Why then are you not serious about this?"

Even as he was scolded by Kayneth, Lancer showed no expression of anger or guilt, however faint. He only kept his head lowered, wearing a look of seriousness. Perhaps he had long been prepared for this interrogation.

"... I only did it for a knight's honor, not to make light of that battle."

"Oh? You refuse to admit it?" Kayneth made a disdainful grunting sound and continued. "Then let me ask you. Why did you let Saber go?"

"That's because—"

"You had overwhelming advantage on more than one occasion, but both times you did not strike; do you really want me to order you with a Command Seal?"

Lancer had no response this time, and held his silence.

"I will say it again. I have witnessed all of tonight's battle, and thus I ask these questions. Lancer, do you think battles are *fun*?" Looking at the silent knight whose head was lowered, Kayneth sneered. "Dos it make you so happy to be able to fight Saber . . . that you can't bring yourself to finish her off?"

A bystander might praise Lancer's bravery and finesse in battle, but this bravery and finesse brought no tangible results to Kayneth, the Master, and only served to enrage him. The original relic that was prepared for summoning his preferred Heroic Spirit, Alexander, had been stolen by his ungrateful student, Waver Velvet. But Waver's power did not match Alexander's at all; unable to control his own Servant, he had allowed Alexander to go on a rampage. Waver's uselessness caused the situation to descend into chaos, destroying Lancer's chance at victory . . . Never had Kayneth encountered such bad luck.

The cause of all this was Waver, but getting angry at someone not present was pointless. He could only store this anger within him, waiting for a time to face Waver in battle, when he could direct all this anger at him. Kayneth was very realistic, calm and brutal in dealing with such external anger.

Conversely, he had no means to control his internal anger. Kayneth, who had led a life of being admired and had never experienced defeat in his entire life, did not allow anything to fall below his expectations—not even by a little bit—whether from himself or a subordinate. Having been successful all his time and never met with any setbacks, he was very weak against defeat. Right now, between Waver's obstruction of his victory and Lancer's inability to bring him victory, the latter enraged him more.

"I am honestly sorry, Master." Noticing Kayneth's anger, Lancer bowed his head deeply and apologized in somber fashion. "I swear on my reputation as a knight: I will bring you Saber's head. Please believe me."

"There is no need to swear it to me again! It is the only possible outcome!" Kayneth, gradually becoming more agitated, suppressed Lancer's apologies angrily. "You already swore that you would bring me, Kayneth El-Melloi, the Holy Grail! In other words, you will destroy the other six Servants; both goals are one and the same. This is the entire premise of the battle. But what are you saying now . . . Is that oath aimed at victory against Saber alone? This falls far short of our initial agreement. What is wrong with you?"

"—The one with something wrong would be you, Kayneth El-Melloi."

The voice was neither Lancer's nor Kayneth's. Nobody knew when the woman who emerged from the bedroom had overheard the conversation between Servant and Master. Although her red hair was like a burning flame, she gave a feeling of extraordinarily

cold, icy beauty. She looked a little younger than Kayneth, and seemed to be a high-class lady of only twenty years or so of age. One could tell at a glance that she was a sentimental and prestigious aristocrat. The temperamental authority of her severe glance made her seem like an empress. Her gaze, a severe look of chastisement, was directed only at one person—Kayneth.

"Lancer has performed excellently. The one misjudging the situation is you."

"Sola, what are you saying?"

Considering Kayneth's usual personality, it was unfathomable that he had not exploded in anger at this point. But this woman, Sola-Ui Nuada-Re Sophia-Ri, the daughter of Kayneth's teacher—the head of the Department of Eulyphis—was very special to him. She was the goddess of victory who would complete Kayneth's glory—Kayneth's fiancée.

The marriage of the two renowned families, Archibald and Sophia-Ri; the union of prodigy and department head's daughter—This was a popular topic in Clock Tower. The Sophia-Ri family crest had been passed on to the first son though, so Sola was not very highly placed as a magus. But through her veins still flows the ancestral magus blood of the Sophia-Ris. The union of Sola, her Magic Circuits many times greater than average, and the prodigious Kayneth would definitely bring about a generation of even greater excellence. But the glorious future as perceived by outsiders may not be that happy for the people involved. Sola, glaring at her fiancé, and Kayneth, wearing a horrible look out of humiliation—from any perspective, those two did not seem to be harmoniously in love.

"Kayneth, if you ask me, Lancer's decision in that situation was correct. To contend with Berserker, he had no choice but to team up with Saber."

Although she had not been present to watch the warehouse district battle, Sola had used her own familiar to find out everything that happened there. Not for the sake of entertainment though; although she had no magic crest, she was still a Sophia-Ri, and had been nurtured in the ways of magecraft since youth. Her own knowledge regarding battles between magi—such as Heaven's Feel—was in no way inferior to a Master's. From her point of view, Kayneth's actions as a Master were decidedly lacking.

"Lancer's Gáe Dearg is a very effective Noble Phantasm against Berserker. Coupled with Saber's aid, defeating that black Servant would have been a simple matter. It was a very good opportunity to destroy the enemy."

"... That is because you don't know how terrifying Saber is." Kayneth, gritting his teeth because he could not vent his anger, rebutted in a hoarse voice.

Although Kayneth's fiancée had a keen eye for analysis, she was not his master or commander. As Master, Kayneth had been determined to fight by his own decisions since the start. His dignity as a man was further bruised by his own fiancée's scolding.

"I used my Master's Perspective[1] to understand Saber's ability. She is a very strong Servant. Her comprehensive abilities exceed Diarmuid's. We've lost a very good opportunity to defeat her!"

"You . . . Do you really understand your Servant's specialty?"

Sola gave a cold, nasal grunt toward the stubborn Kayneth.

"Did you think Gáe Buidhe was only for show? Compared to Saber, who has already received critical and incurable damage, wouldn't Berserker, whose identity is still unknown, be more of a threat?"

Kayneth wanted to argue further, but he had not a single word of rebuttal. Faced with Sola's offensive mannerism, he was intimidated.

"First of all, if you really consider Saber to be dangerous . . ." Kayneth remained silent, and Sola continued. ". . . Why did you leave Saber's Master unharmed? That Einsbern woman was standing to the side, completely defenseless. When Lancer had occupied Saber's attention and they were in the midst of battle, why did you not attack the opposing Master? What you did instead was hide in the sidelines and watch passively to the end. You're the one who was in the wrong."

Watching as Sola sighed deeply, Kayneth burned with anger at the humiliation, but he could only watch her in silence without a word.

With any other person, Kayneth would've put an end to this humiliation long ago. Even if the title of Lord El-Melloi was on

1 Master's Perspective The ability of Masters to understand the abilities and statistics of Servants easily by observing them.

the line, he would definitely have inflicted many times the same humiliation in return. Sola-Ui Nuada-Re Sophia-Ri was the sole exception; not only because she's the daughter of Kayneth's teacher, but also because she's Kayneth's fiancée. Their marriage would bring Kayneth even more honor and prestige, and take him one step toward the future he had always been pursuing. This proud-as-a-gem, intelligent lady was the only woman Kayneth, loved in the entire world. The first time they met, Kayneth's heart had been captured by her even before they exchanged a single word.

Perhaps noticing Kayneth's depression, Sola's tone relented, and she continued with less derision: "Kayneth. Do you know what your advantage over the other Masters is? It lies in you yourself."

"That—obviously—"

"Tacking your own designs onto the original contract system—you really are a prodigy. You deserve to be called the greatest prodigy in Eulyphis." Even though Kayneth was completely sick of hearing words of compliment, he did not mind hearing these words come out of Sola's mouth, no matter how many times he had heard them.

But Sola's opinion of him was not mere flattery. The secret technique Kayneth prepared for this Heaven's Feel had completely overwritten the rules of the war designed by The Three Families of the Beginning. Servant and Master are joined by a line of cause and effect, but with the right technique, it is possible to separate the right of Command Mantras and the right of supplying prana, allowing two separate summoners to take up one each. By way of

Kayneth's prodigious ability, this impossible technique was made possible. Kayneth owned the Command Mantras, yet Sola was the one who suppled the Servant with prana. They were a two-person Master team.

"Kayneth, although you are first-rate as a magus, as a soldier you are merely second-rate. You went through all that trouble to complete your preparations, but were unable to make proper use of them on the battlefield. Am I right?"

"No, I . . ."

"Hey, why do you think I supply Lancer with prana? This is what you should be responsible for originally, so why should I commit to it? Isn't this for the sake of making your battles go well, for the sake of letting you attain victory in Heaven's Feel? Compared to those Masters who have to supply prana to their Servants, you already have a crushing advantage. You can fully utilize your prana to execute various tactics."

"But . . . the war's just started, and it's better to be cautious . . ."

"Oh, really? Then why do you demand results so hastily from Lancer?"

Although Sola's tone was softer than it was initially, it still harbored implicit mocking of his cowardice. Kayneth's expression became even worse.

"So before you blame Lancer, you should think on your own actions. Kayneth, tonight you—"

"Sola-sama, please stop." A sudden, low-toned voice interrupted Sola. It was Lancer, who at some unknown moment had raised his head and was now looking straight at Sola. "As a

knight, I will not tolerate your ongoing humiliation of my Master."

"No, that wasn't my intent . . . I apologize. I crossed the line."

Sola, behaving with all the dignity of an empress just a moment ago, apologized and lowered her eyes as if in shame after one sentence from Lancer. The transformation seemed way too sudden even to any onlooker.

The scene left a very negative impact on Kayneth. Sola had always nagged at him incessantly, and never listened to him even once; he, who would soon be her husband. To Sola, who would soon be his wife, why did the words of a Servant hold much more weight than those of her fiancé? Since the start, Sola had been arguing on Lancer's side. Perhaps she could not stand watching Lancer being scolded? Kayneth watched Sola's eyes, which were fixated on Lancer, and saw some emotion in them that he had never witnessed before. He shifted his eyes toward Lancer—

The beauty mole under Lancer's left eye caught his attention. Is that the fabled "tear mole" of Diarmuid ua Duibhne, which attracted females? No, baseless suspicion is stupid. Even a commoner would know that Sola was the daughter of the renowned Sophia-Ri family. Though she did not possess a magic crest, she still had very strong resistance against this type of charm spell . . . unless she herself did not willingly resist this type of charm, then—

As Kayneth was lost in thought, the fire alarm went off without warning, interrupting his train of thought.

". . . What? What's happening?"

Sola mumbled confusedly, and at the same time the room telephone began to ring. On the call display was the lobby's line number. Kayneth calmly lifted up the receiver and listened to the receptionist. When he finished, Kayneth's gaze once again regained the sharpness unique to magi.

"It seems there is a fire somewhere downstairs. The management is telling us to evacuate." Kayneth said to Sola as he hung up the phone. "Although the fire is not too severe, the places that caught fire are very scattered. It looks like arson."

"Arson? Tonight?"

"Yeah. I think it is definitely not coincidental." Kayneth made a disdainful sound. The restlessness and worries that were in his heart earlier disappeared quickly and completely. "This is a plan to disperse the crowd. The opponent must be a magus. It seems he doesn't wish to do battle in a building with too many bystanders."

Sola spoke with a tense expression.

"Then—an ambush?"

"I'm afraid so. It might be that guy from the warehouse street who wants to play some more."

"Interesting. That's exactly what we want, isn't it? Lancer?"

"Yes. Exactly."

Lancer nodded definitively, as if preparing to do battle with the enemy. Of all seven Masters, only one would be in such a hurry to attack Kayneth—the Master of Saber, whose Servant had been hit by Gáe Buidhe. He must want to dispel this curse as soon as possible.

"Lancer, go down to meet them. But don't disperse them too quickly."

Lancer, comprehending Kayneth's hidden intent, nodded in return. "Understood. Cut off the attackers' path of retreat, then chase them here. Is that it?"

"Yes. Since we have visitors, then why not let them take a good look at Kayneth El-Melloi's magic atelier?"

This hotel, Kayneth's stronghold, had undergone complete renovation; not a material renovation, but a fortification through magecraft. In this building totaling thirty-two floors, Kayneth's bounded field covered twenty-four floors. This place could be called a castle of magecraft. In addition, there were three magical furnaces for Kayneth's exclusive use, and serving in place of hounds were ten or so summoned evil spirits and apparitions. There was not a single opening even in the drainage pipes; Kayneth had completely covered the area underneath the hall with his bounded field.

Rather than invade enemy territory, it was much better to perfect one's own territory. As for the challenger who dared to set foot in here, Kayneth would make him realize the true terror of Lord El-Melloi.

"Since all the other customers are already gone, there won't be anything to worry about. You can both use your full power in this fight."

The irrepressible sound of laughter spilled from Kayneth's throat. The knight who could not stop trembling in excitement also rushed out. To Kayneth right now, the only thing necessary is action. Only action and achievement could dispel the humiliation inflicted by Sola. Right now, the only thing to do is to fully realize his potential—which had others named him a

prodigy for—and prove his capabilities. Yes; Kayneth was out for blood. The dark anger that had been bottled up inside him must be relieved with somebody's blood. The unfortunate enemy who coincidentally showed up to attack is about to become the perfect offering.

"You said I was a second rate-soldier. I will make you take those words back, Sola."

"Okay. I'll be waiting."

Kayneth's fiancée, who usually had nothing but criticism for him, at this juncture watched him with a smiling face. Kayneth's fighting spirit heightened even more.

The fear and drowsiness of the customers, stirred in the midst of dreams by the fire alarm and herded to the parking lot, mixed with the outside cold and left difficult expressions on their faces. Amid these people, the employees of the hotel scurried about busily.

"... Mr. Archibald! Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald! Are you here?"

Of all the names recorded on the customer list, there was only one whose presence had not been confirmed. The bellhop called for him in a frantic voice. Everyone regarded this generous customer, who had reserved the entire top floor of the hotel, very highly. He was one they least wanted to be in danger.

"Mr. Archibald! Are you here?"

"—I am here. Do not worry."

A resonant voice came from behind the bellhop, but as he turned around he became confused. The person speaking to him was a Japanese male wearing an old-styled coat. It was too much

for a joke. The angry bellhop was about to yell at him, but was captivated by the man's eyes; they held an indescribable, mysterious force of attraction. The bellhop, unable to avoid his eyes, could not even speak.

"I am Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald. My wife Sola is with me." The unknown Japanese male stated in a clear voice. The bellhop accepted this without any suspicion, as though hypnotized.

"... Is that so? Ah, yes. That's it." The bellhop checked off a spot on the 'escaped' section of his list, confirming that all customers were safe, and exhaled a long breath. His suspicions while speaking to Archibald earlier and his feelings that something was amiss had disappeared without a trace.

Watching the employee tending to the other customers, Emiya Kiritsugu left the chaotic crowd. His earlier hypnotic suggestion, to a commoner with no magic resistance whatsoever, would not be broken so soon. Walking to a shady, dark area some distance away from the hotel, Kiritsugu pulled out the cellphone in his pocket as he scanned the surroundings to ensure no one was watching him. Cellphones were very common among the people, and had been of great help to Kiritsugu. They were a simple yet useful wireless apparatus for communication, and holding one would not draw any suspicion. First he had to contact Maiya, who was in position for surveillance.

"Everything set on your end?"

"No irregularities. Ready."

Maiya was situated on a tall building, still under construction, diagonally across Fuyuki's Hyatt hotel. From that position designated by Kiritsugu, it was possible to see Kayneth's room

clearly. Kiritsugu sighed lightly, reaching for his cigarette box with one hand and dialing a sequence of numbers on the cellphone with the other. It was an unused number; there was no response whatsoever from his cellphone. The modified communication loops were connecting not to an analog signal, but to the detonator of a C4 bomb. It only caused a very small explosion which could not be heard outside the hotel. But what resounded in the night was the horrifying sound of reinforced concrete splintering and collapsing. The evacuees who noticed and saw the sudden change in the towering building began to shout in panic.

"The hotel, the hotel is collapsing!"

The hotel, towering at over 150M in height, maintained its upright posture but collapsed, as though sucked into the ground. The outside walls collapsed inward, not a shard of debris flew outward, and only the dust created by the collapse spread toward the surrounding streets. This is precision blasting, a highly advanced blasting technique used primarily to demolish tall buildings. The destruction of load-bearing walls and key support structures causes the building to collapse downward and inward on its own weight. Using minimal explosives to achieve total destruction—Emiya Kiritsugu, familiar with all blasting techniques from past to present, had special appreciation for this art of destruction.

All buildings in Fuyuki City serving as magi bases were on Emiya Kiritsugu's destruction list; Fuyuki's Hyatt hotel was one of its entries. Kiritsugu obtained the building's blueprints beforehand and determined the points at which to place

explosives. With complete preparation, actual execution required less than an hour.

Although the evacuees were as far as possible from the collapsing building and outside the range of flying debris, they were showered with the dust sent flying by the collapse, and mired in a state of panic. While watching the disturbance in the crowd, Kiritsugu sought a wind-sheltered niche and lit the cigarette in his hand.

"Maiya, how are things on your end?"

"No activity on the thirty-second floor until the end. The target has not escaped from the building."

In other words—Kiritsugu thought with some satisfaction as he looked at the ashes of the ruins of Fuyuki's Hyatt hotel—the one called 'Lord El-Melloi' Kayneth is most certainly keeping the rubble company. The thirty-second floor that Kayneth was on, succumbing to the chain reaction caused by the precision blasting, had lost its supports and practically dropped 150M to the ground in freefall. No matter how well-defended by a bounded field, it probably could not protect its occupants in the face of such destructive force.

Suddenly, there came the sound of a child crying, and Kiritsugu's attention was stolen from the ruins.

The child's mother walked past Kiritsugu holding a fearful child who would not stop crying. Both were dressed only in pajamas and covered from head to toe with white ash, looking so miserable that it was hard to watch. Kiritsugu kept watching the backs of the parent and child . . . He snapped back into focus upon

feeling the burning cigarette tip on his hand, and tossed the spent cigarette to the floor, stamping it out underfoot.

Emiya Kiritsugu felt slightly confused; sentimentalism was definitely unacceptable for him. This kind of weak emotion would put his life in danger, but he could not face his failure with a composed attitude. Yes—even if he did not admit it, this was his reality. Kiritsugu saw in the receding figures of parent and child the image of Irisviel and Ilyasviel. He once believed there was no discrimination in sacrifice. All life was equal; choosing the path of smaller sacrifice was okay. Under such judgment, the lives of women and children received no special treatment.

The Holy Grail could be used to save the world. Kayneth was a target to be eliminated in order to obtain the Holy Grail. There were a thousand or so people in the Fuyuki Hyatt hotel, but the Holy Grail could save at least five billion people. Kiritsugu could eradicate these tenants along with Kayneth if the need arose.

Then why did he need to set a fire beforehand to create this disturbance? He had thought this was the obvious tactic. Kayneth set many traps in order to defend against an ambush; as a tactic against this strategic defense, it had definitely yielded effective results. That prodigy magus held his iron wall as his pride, but he never thought the entire castle would be destroyed as he remained inside. But was his real intent really limited to this? His sentimental hope that the innocent tenants would escape in time —did it show itself then, unconsciously?

This was fatal romanticism. On the battlefield, such sentiment would definitely bring an early death. Kiritsugu once again lit a cigarette to steady his heart. He had degraded. Although he did

not know how much weaker he was now, Emiya Kiritsugu today had definitely degraded in the last nine years. If this continued, he might not be victorious in the Holy Grail War. In any case, not recovering his cold manner of judgment was unacceptable. The faster he could accomplish it, the better.

The neighborhood disturbed by the late night incident had at last begun to stir. Watching the crowd gather in the street, Kiritsugu inhaled deeply, took out his cellphone, and gave Maiya the signal to retreat. The sound that reached his ears was not the voice of his subordinate, but the roar of two metallic entities colliding.

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A metallic lookout, as yet unnamed: nearing its completion, it was temporarily known as Fuyuki shopping center's thirty-eighth floor.

Its construction was already more than half-complete, and only work on the exterior remained. This high-rise building would soon become a shopping center and the symbol of Fuyuki Shinto, but right now it was only an empty skeleton of reinforced concrete, buffeted by the strong gales of the night. Everything seemed distant and bleak, even the streetlights and the stars in the sky. It was in this void that Hisau Maiya knelt unmoving, supporting on her shoulder the night vision-equipped AUG assault rifle. The muzzle was propped on her upright left knee. If Kayneth had noticed Kiritsugu's plan and escaped through the window,

Hisau Maiya, lying in wait here, would have ambushed him. But the preparation turned out to be unnecessary.

"Maiya, what's the situation there?"

From Hisau Maiya's earphones came the questioning voice of Kiritsugu from ground level. Since both hands were needed to support her rifle, Maiya switched the cellphone to earphone mode to free her hands.

"There was no activity on the thirty-second floor throughout. The target has not escaped from the hotel." Maiya spoke into the microphone beside her mouth, giving Kiritsugu a brief summary of her surveillance. Although a witness to recent devastating destruction, her voice contained no hint of excitement. Her surveillance mission here was over. Maiya retrieved the bullets—they never had a chance to be of use—from the gun, put them back into the case, and slung the assault rifle over her shoulder, then stood up and headed for the stairs.

At that moment, she noticed a trace of abnormality. Not a typical abnormality, but a trace, subtle change of atmosphere. For an experienced soldier, this kind of killing intent was easy to detect.

"—Such razor senses, Miss." From behind the frozen Maiya came a male voice, low and cold. The voice echoed in the empty building of reinforced concrete, muffling its origin.

Without response or question, Maiya pulled the 9mm caliber handgun from her belt, determining the enemy's location with honed intuition. Discovery of her existence was reason enough to make this unidentified presence a target for elimination.

"—Hmm, it's also nice to have this kind of preparation." The man hidden in the shadows said so in a mocking voice.

At that moment, something landed at Maiya's feet, tossed from the shadow of a pillar. Maiya immediately aimed her gun at the object, verified its harmlessness, and pointed her gun back where it was tossed from, while keeping the object in peripheral vision.

It was the corpse of a small animal. A bat. Judging from the CCD camera on the bat's abdomen, this was definitely the bat familiar Maiya had sent out—the one deployed beside Fuyuki Church, which she had lost contact with. No doubt, it could only be *him* who had tossed the corpse of the bat. Seemingly losing interest in concealment, he slowly walked out from behind the pillar, exposing himself to Maiya's line of fire.

The man before her, dressed in a pitch-black frock, seemed full of authority and pressure; she knew him.

"Kotomine Kirei . . ."

"Oh? This should be the first time we have met. How do you know who I am? Perhaps . . . your precognition?"

Maiya, realizing her mistake, regretted it.

Showing not the slightest bit of discomfort at facing Maiya's gun, he continued calmly.

"If so, you should definitely know many other things as well, right? This is a prime location for spying on Fuyuki Hyatt hotel's thirty-second floor; perhaps some very important person lives there?"

This time it was Maiya's turn to be silent. Her mind was filled with suspicion—as a Master, Kotomine Kirei should be concealing

himself; why would he choose to show up here? What is his real intention?

On the other end of the weapon, Kirei diverged his gaze slightly outwards, at the pile of rubble that used to be Fuyuki Hyatt hotel. He stared intently for a while, then heaved a long sigh.

"Still, was it really necessary to destroy the building too? To employ tactics of this sort—can he still be called a magus? Perhaps he should not be considered a magus to begin with?"

This man—sudden surprise registered in Maiya—*he knows*. He knows all about Emiya Kiritsugu, as much as Emiya Kiritsugu knows Kotomine Kirei.

"Look at me rambling on and on here, Miss. Why don't you say something? where is the man who should be here in your place right now?"

At this question, Maiya pronounced a new judgment: This man before her must be killed. The report of rapid fire rang out. Despite its decent damage capability, the 9mm caliber bullet lacked power; in order to kill effectively, it was key to shoot the abdominal region three times successively. Instead of aiming for a small fatal point that dealt instant death, dealing heavy injury to a position that was easier to hit was more effective. This is the rule of shoot-to-kill.

But Maiya's bullets did not hit the organs beneath the frock; they struck the hard concrete floor. Kotomine Kirei could never have reacted faster than a supersonic bullet, but he had determined Maiya's thoughts before the trigger was pulled, and acted beforehand. His judgment on tactics was amazing. Predicting

the moment of firing and dodging the bullets—even in the field of thaumaturgy, this was an ability beyond average.

Not only that—in the same instant, the person who turned to hide was not Kirei, but Maiya. Her right hand was stained with blood, and the handgun she earlier clutched in her hand fell to the ground with a metallic clatter. She stared with surprise at the pillar she had been propping her back against. The keen edge that suddenly jutted from the pillar glinted coldly.

The thin blade, longer than a meter, brought to mind weapons used for fencing; the hilt was very short for a sword. This was the projectile weapon used specially by Executors of the Holy Church; the Black Key. This was what had cut the back of Maiya's hand and made her drop her handgun. Kirei had thrown this weapon and avoided the bullet simultaneously. Although a hand-tossed weapon, it had enough power to penetrate reinforced concrete. But it only made Maiya drop her gun, and seemed void of killing intent; it was probably meant to disarm the opponent and destroy her morale. Capturing the oponent alive would be the best outcome. After all, Maiya had not answered Kirei's question yet.

"Your movements aren't bad. Very sharp." Kirei, now holding the initiative after turning the tables earlier, spoke and walked over leisurely. Once again, a Black Key appeared in his hands. The long blade of the Black Key was a semi-solid formed by prana, so holding it by the small hilt was sufficient. Nobody knew exactly how many Black Keys were hidden under Kirei's loose frock. The Black Key, one of the staple tools of the Holy Church's Executors, had great power, but was also very difficult to use. One who is

able to use its power so skillfully must be a very strong expert; such was the oponent Maiya was now up against.

Maiya was no warrior, only a soldier; she had no combat record worth boasting of, and concerned herself only with the analysis of combat. Kotomine Kirei's combat ability obviously surpassed her own. In this situation, where she had no advantage of equipment, terrain or tactics, admitting her defeat was wiser.

"What is it, Maiya? What happened?"

It was Kiritsugu's voice in the earphones. The cellphone in her pocket kept her in contact with Kiritsugu. But she could not respond; Kirei would hear her. That horrifying executor's real goal was not Maiya, but Kiritsugu. Maiya was Kiritsugu's subordinate, carrying out every action based on his instructions; Kirei's judgment was verified here.

"What's the matter? Will you not call for help? Emiya Kiritsugu is just nearby, isn't he?" Kirei announced this without a shred of doubt; so convinced was he of his judgment. If Kiritsugu wanted the Holy Grail, he would definitely act tonight. The effect of Diarmuid's Gáe Buidhe curse was easy to see. They had been mired into a very unfavorable situation, with one of Saber's arms sealed, while the six remaining Servants were still in good condition. To the Einsbern camp, the most pressing matter was to eliminate the origin of the curse—Lancer—as soon as possible.

Hence, Kirei had set up his net near Kayneth's dwelling, calmly awaiting the arrival of the ambushers. He found not Emiya Kiritsugu but someone else. Yet he was certain that this person was acting on Kiritsugu's instructions. This woman he faced right was definitely the key to finding Emiya Kiritsugu. He could not

kill her; it would be best to capture her alive. All was fine if he could just make her talk . . . even if he had to break her arms and legs.

Having made the cruel decision, Kotomine Kirei approached the woman's hiding place slowly. The opponent should be unarmed. The disassembled assault rifle would not be reassembled quickly enough, and the dropped pistol was far away; the match was decided. But he was stopped by an impediment beyond his expectations. A veil of white smoke suddenly appeared between him and his prey, completely obscuring his vision, and accompanying it the irritating odor of chemical reaction rushed into his nostrils.

"Smokescreen?!" It was a smokescreen released by a military-use smoke dispersion bomb. In that instant, while his sight was obscured, Maiya escaped with haste. Kotomine Kirei tossed a Black Key in the direction of the noise, but hit nothing. The instinct of an Executor who had been through countless battles told him he could not move carelessly here. Kotomine Kirei held Black Keys in both hands, not daring to let his guard down the slightest, and surveyed his surroundings, waiting for the smoke to disperse. In this building exposed to strong winds, the thick smoke took only a few seconds to dissipate—still long enough for the woman to escape. He was the only one left in the building. Realizing this, Kirei grunted and put away the Black Keys. He had no intention of pursuit.

Kirei picked up the smoke dispersion bomb, now empty, and began to inspect it. It was an American grenade model. There was nothing special about it; something anyone could get if they had

the right connections. She had not thrown it; he would have stopped her with a Black Key if she had moved even slightly. This had been tossed by someone else helping her to escape. There should not be anyone else in this building; the smoke grenade must have been tossed in from outside.

Kirei walked to the edge of the building, ignoring the wind tugging at his frock, and looked down. Around the rubble of the former Fuyuki Hyatt hotel, there were no buildings that stood shoulder-to-shoulder with this one. The distance from ground level to his position measured at least 150M. It would be hard to aim at this position precisely even with a long range weapon, much less a hand-tossed smoke grenade. It would take a cosmic farce for someone to toss that up from ground level. But Kirei was, after all, an Executor who had hunted many strange magi before. He was already used to facing enemies who worked beyond common sense. This level of strangeness was not worth any surprise on his part.

The magus who stopped him was somewhere below. With this instinctual realisation confirmed, he had gained something tonight. At the same time, Kirei felt the breath of the strange form concealed beside him.

"Assassin?"

"Yes. It is me." Assassin, sporting a long pitch-black gown, materialized kneeling before Kirei. This Assassin was one of the three who were spying on Irisviel and Saber in the forest, the one tasked with delivering the information.

"Didn't I tell you not to materialize indoors?"

"I am terribly sorry, but I have urgent things to report . . ."

– 144:09:25

A streak of white light gradually appeared at the eastern sky; the night of deadly back-to-back fights was over. At this moment, Kirei was using the magical communicator to establish a connection with the Tousaka mansion in the Miyami district. He and his father Kotomine Risei were preparing to call for an emergency strategy meeting.

"Huh? Can we really trace Caster's trail immediately?"

Tokiomi's satisfaction and praise were revealed through his voice. Kirei and Assassin's efforts had finally yielded the results he wanted. Although his Servant was still a tricky problem, on his apprentice's side things had progressed very smoothly.

"Our opponent is really the Heroic Spirit of a magus. Despite being an Assassin, it was still tough for him to enter their workshop unnoticed. But now we are sure of the enemy's approximate position. Currently, Assassin is surveilling the perimeter of the area closely. Once Caster emerges from his workshop, his activities can be known immediately."

"Which is to say, Caster did not stay within his workshop, but is actively operating outside?"

"Yes. That's because . . ." Recalling Tokiomi's reaction when he delivered the report last time, Kirei hesitated slightly. Caster and his Master's actions might give rise to grave consequences.

". . . Both of them went to the city beside Miyami town and captured the sleeping children back to their workshop. They had caught fifteen of them before daybreak. Though it mostly went

smoothly, the parents of three of the children discovered them, and a struggle ensued. They killed the entire family."

Able to clearly feel Tokiomi's fury, Kirei continued promptly before he managed to reply.

"Caster uses magecraft unhesitatingly, and does not even bother to clean and tidy up after the act. Now, under my father's instructions, workers from the Holy Church are clearing the traces they left behind at the scene. However . . . I'm afraid that even after today, Caster and his Master's behavior will not change in any way."

". . . What on earth are they thinking?! What kind of jerk is he? —That Master of Caster."

"According to Assassin who eavesdropped on their conversations, the Master had been carrying out similar murders even before summoning Caster. Though we can't be sure yet, he and the wanted serial killer are apparently one and the same."

". . . . . ." Tokiomi breathed heavily in anger.

Since this month, news of the mysterious serial killer—'The Demon of Fuyuki City'—had been continuously reported. Using brutal methods rarely seen in these few years, four murder incidents in the city had been traced to him. Worse still, in the last case, it was said that he had killed all the family members in their sleep—an extremely savage killer. The police of Fuyuki City had set up a special task force, gathering police from the neighboring vicinity to crack the case quickly. Nevertheless, there had been no progress at all; they could not even determine the suspect's facial features.

To Tokiomi, such a serious happening during Heaven's Feel was a headache. This should be the same for all Masters. Heaven's Feel must be carried out in secret; this was a solemn rule for all contestants. One who drew so much attention to this place would not be welcomed.

All magi were responsible for guarding the noble creed. Nobody was to expose magecraft to the commonfolk. Everyone researched their magecraft underground; those who failed to guard this secret would be put to death promptly by the Magus Association; it was firm and thorough in its management of all matters related to the secrecy of magecraft. It is with good reason that mention of this matter always made magi blood run cold.

A magus splashed on the headlines of the community news almost daily, a Master who was puppet to his Servant—this had to be a critically alarming situation.

"About these two; did you obtain any detailed information, reports, or something like that?"

"From how they call each other, we can gather that the Master's name is 'Ryuunosuke,' while Caster is known as 'Bluebeard.'"

"Bluebeard? Then Caster's real identity has to be Count Gilles de Rais, isn't it?"

"Possibly. He was very famous in alchemy and black magic."

Considering his fame as a legend, it is no surprise that he was summoned by the Holy Grail as a Servant. But his characteristics are totally different from a Heroic Spirit's; it would be more fitting to consider him a 'Vengeful Spirit' instead.

"From their conversations, Ryuunosuke has no prior knowledge about Heaven's Feel. He does not even have the self-consciousness of a magus."

"This is quite possible. Under accidental situations, it is possible for someone without any magecraft teaching to make a contract with the summoned Servant . . . That Master will be the Servant's puppet."

"But, that is . . ."

Recalling what he had heard through Assassin's ears, Kirei continued: ". . . In any case, Caster's words and actions are beyond the boundary of normal comprehension. He keeps saying the Holy Grail is already his, must rescue Jeanne d'Arc—things that do not make sense at all."

Tokiomi let out a deep sigh, a single breath that tried to expel all exasperation. "A mentally disturbed, rampaging Servant, and a totally helpless Master? Why on earth did the Holy Grail choose such jerks?"

Servants attacking human beings was nothing out of the ordinary. As spiritual beings who exist by feeding on prana, Servants did not restore their prana only from their Masters; they could also obtain energy by absorbing the spirit of human beings. Masters incapable of providing sufficient prana to their Servants may use sacrificial ceremonies to make up for the inadequate prana.

Even in this Heaven's Feel, the offering of sacrifices and similar scenarios were within Tokiomi's expectations; it was something which could not be helped. Magi were already existences beyond common rules. They could ignore morality and

common perception of right and wrong. The sacrificing of innocent people, if done covertly and secretly, would be met with silent approval. But reckless murders like this which create a huge commotion—such behavior would never be allowed.

"You cannot let this matter run wild, right? Tokiomi-kun." With a displeased look, Father Risei cut in.

"Caster's and his Master's actions have clearly obstructed the progress of the Heaven's Feel. This is against the rules."

"Of course. As someone whose former job was to guard the secrecy of magecraft, I will not let them off."

For generations, the Tousaka family had secretly guarded Fuyuki City and its surrounding regions. The Magus Association had extrusted them with managing the laylines of the land and monitoring any abnormal occurrences. This was also why, as one of the Three Families of the Beginning, the Tousakas offered this place under their watch as the stage for the Heaven's Feel. As a Master whose goal was to acquire the Holy Grail, and as the guardian of this land, Tokiomi had to stop Caster's actions.

"I'm afraid they are also behind the continual disappearances of the children after the four murder cases." Kirei reported his views dryly. "There only seventeen children reported missing. If we take into account this morning's surveillance and include the extra ones they captured, the number of missing children should be at least thirty. Their actions will only intensify, I'm afraid. Father, we have to stop them as soon as possible."

"Yes. It is already beyond the point where warnings and punishments are still effective. The only solution is to destroy Caster and his Master."

"To fight a Servant, we have to rely on another Servant. However, my Assassin cannot take any action."

Kirei's remarks made sense. Assassin's purpose was to carry out clandestine plans; besides, how could he be allowed to show up again so quickly?

Father Risei contemplated this in silence awhile. To Tokiomi, he suggested: "It is within my jurisdiction as a supervisor to alter the rules slightly. What if we put the struggle for the Holy Grail aside first? Let us muster the other Masters and go against Caster. How about it?"

"Huh? Then . . . what do you have in mind, Father?"

"I can provide some assistance to the one who manages to eradicate Caster's Master, in his future battles. I doubt the other Masters wish to see Heaven's Feel disrupted because of Caster's rampage either."

". . . Oh, I see. Change the objective of this game to hunting. Is that right?"

Apart from the Servant whose hand was injured in that haphazard fight last night, none of the Servants had been put out of action yet. If everyone shifted their attention to Caster, his life would be hanging by a thread. Like a lit candle in a hurricane, Caster's fate would be extinguished any moment.

"This condition of awarding benefits to the one who defeats Caster . . . Will it backfire on us instead? Will it eventually hinder us from obtaining the Holy Grail?"

Smiling, Father Risei replied. "Of course, it is not good for someone else to have an advantage. But the only one who could

deliver the final blow to Caster, cornered by the hounds, would be Archer."

"... I see. That is obvious."

As long as Kirei's Assassin was present, it would be easy to arrange for Archer to deliver the finishing blow. The rules would be altered, but the Tousaka camp's battle tactics and skills could remain unchanged.

"Then quickly prepare to gather the other Masters."

His mind made up, Father Risei got up and left the underground chamber. Kirei was about to stand up and follow, but Tokiomi stopped him.

"... Oh yes, Kirei. I heard you left Fuyuki Church for your own reasons yesterday night."

Kirei had already anticipated the question. On the surface, Tokiomi's apprentice had been defeated in this Heaven's Feel and was currently seeking protection from the church, so he should not be doing anything at all.

"I am very sorry. I too know this is risky, but I had discovered a spy in the vicinity of the church. So I had to do something about it —"

"Spy? Is it targeting you, a part of the Church?" Tokiomi's tone became stricter.

"Please don't worry yourself over it. I have already destroyed the spy. No secret will be leaked out," answered Kirei in a breezy voice. Kirei surprised even himself by the ease with which he delivered the lie.

"Why didn't you use your Servant?"

"It was trivial; Assassin was not required."

After a moment of silence, Tokiomi commented, slightly unhappily. "... You are a highly skilled Executor, and I know you have great confidence in your ability. But in this current situation, aren't your actions rather careless?"

"You are right. I will tread carefully next time." Kirei lied again. He would probably head into the battlefield a few more times to trace Emiya Kiritsugu's trail, until he found him. He waited until the communicator was completely silent before leaving the underground chamber.

As he opened the door of his room on the first floor of the house, a sense of disharmony struck him, as though he had just walked into the wrong room. Not the scent, nor the temperature; neither had changed. The whole room felt different, greatly changed. The plain room of his suddenly emanated luxurious, elegant aura, like a palace. The setting and lighting was the same. The only difference was the man sitting on the bench in the middle of the room, ignorant of everyone else.

The unwarranted intruder surprised Kirei a little. Startled, Kirei frowned. "... Archer?"

Golden hair flaming upright, and with a pair of ruby-red eyes, the man before him was none other than Tousaka Tokiomi's Servant, the King of Heroes, Gilgamesh. In place of his original golden armor, the Heroic Spirit now donned a modern get-up: leather jacket with furs and fashionable leather pants.

Since his summoning, this Servant had been wandering around carelessly, enabled by his Independent Action ability. Now tired of parading himself in spirit form, Archer decided to dress himself for play, taking on physical form on a whim and strolling the

streets at night. Although he had heard of Archer's idiotic deeds from Tokiomi, Kirei never imagined that Archer would appear in his room.

Apparently, Archer felt no shame whatsoever at his intrusion of another's room. He even took the liberty of helping himself to Kirei's wine collection, from which he had casually taken a bottle of red wine and poured himself a glass. Elegantly, Archer sipped the wine.

"Though smaller than Tokiomi's, your collection exhibits more refined taste. Quite the presumptuous apprentice you are."

Still in the dark about Archer's reason for visiting, Kirei eyed at the row of empty wine bottles on the table. It seems Archer had tasted all Kirei's hidden wine. Perhaps initially surprising, Kirei's interest in wine was nothing strange. He habitually purchased with immediacy any wine of extraordinary quality that he caught wind of. The world of wine is deep and unbounded, if one wishes to pursue its study. Wine can fill the emptiness of one's heart with its taste. When one feels hollow inside, getting drunk on spirits is not a bad idea too. Walking in the cul-de-sac, Kirei thought about these ideas half-seriously. Nevertheless, hitherto, he had never tried wine even once. All he did was add to his collection of delicious wines. Kirei did not even think of serving it to his guests. As for this drunkard casually drinking from the hidden stashes of others, no amount of flattery or praise would make Kirei's cold attitude any more welcoming.

"What do you want?"

Facing this blunt question, Archer lifted up his wine glass and gazed meaningfully at Kirei.

"It seems I'm not the only one who is bored."

"Bored?"

Kirei realized the meaning behind those words instantly. Apparently, this Heroic Spirit knew what had transpired last night —Kirei disobeying Tokiomi's orders to stay put, and venturing out alone—although Kirei was not sure how long Archer had known about it.

"What's wrong, Kirei? Are you also feeling unsatisfied with merely obeying Tokiomi's commands?"

"... So, are you still unhappy with your contract now, Gilgamesh?"

Evading Archer's question, Kirei retorted in a displeased tone. Although he was the mystical King of Heroes, Kirei did not see him as someone to be feared. In spite of Tokiomi's views, a Servant is still a servant. No matter who this Heroic Spirit was, he was still Servant Archer, an existence belonging to Tokiomi. The two of them—Tokiomi's apprentice and servant—were of equal status, and there was no need for excessive worry.

Archer did not mind this attitude of his. He merely snorted, and took another sip of wine.

"The one who summoned me here and provides me with prana is Tokiomi. I still have to treat him with etiquette appropriate to a Servant." With this surprising declaration, a sliver of melancholic haze gleamed in Gilgamesh's red irises.

"But he is, frankly speaking, a really boring man, completely devoid of any interesting aspects."

"... Such words should not come from you, a Servant." Kirei felt a slight surge of anger at Archer's rude remark toward his

master, astonishing even himself. But he also started to glimpse why Archer came to visit him. In this more relaxed atmosphere, Kirei slowly accustomized to the presence of Archer in his room.

"Master Tokiomi's orders—are they really that mundane?"

"Huh... they are really meaningless. Achieve the omnipotent, wish-granting device, Akasha? What a pointless wish."

The only thing every magus yearned for even in their dreams; Archer laughed it off just like that. But Kirei was able to empathize with him.

"The Radix is something every magus desires and craves. Bystanders would not be able to comprehend it."

"Then you are one of those bystanders too, Kirei. To my knowledge, your prior position was one which opposed the magi, isn't that right?" Archer had seemingly heard about Kirei's complicated standpoint. He may put on haughty airs, but his ability to gather information was amazingly sharp.

Kirei folded his arms, deep in thought. Taking the viewpoint of a representative of the Assembly of the Eighth Sacrament, what is the purpose of Tokiomi's Heaven's Feel?

"... The path leading to the Radix can be said to lead out of the world. Which is to say, it will not affect the inside, which is this world. For the Church, which only focuses on the inside, the magi's pursuit is downright pointless. We can only interpret their actions as meaningless."

"Oh, I see. I am only interested in things related to this universe, which is also my garden." Speaking like one who owns the universe; such a haughty attitude really suited his title of King

of Heroes. "I am not interested in territories that I cannot control. That is why I care not for this Radix thing at all."

Kirei smiled bitterly. In other words, Archer's stand went against all the other magi. It only made sense that Tousaka Tokiomi, a typical magus, felt helpless when faced with someone like Archer.

"If the Holy Grail of Fuyuki City is only a special device which seeks the Radix, no matter how violently the magi fight for it, I think the Holy Church would just ignore them. Unfortunately, the Holy Grail's ability to realize wishes is omnipotent. It has unlimited, mysterious power to change even the inside of the world. If such a great power were to fall into the wrong hands, it will threaten our belief. This is the reason the Holy Church chose Tousaka. Instead of ignoring this matter and letting the Grail fall into the wrong hands, it is better to waste it on a boring, meaningless wish . . . But I suspect my father had other intentions from the start."

"What you mean is, the other Masters fight for the Holy Grail for reasons different from Tokiomi's?"

Kirei nodded his head in response to Archer's query.

"While Tokiomi is a typical representation of a magus, he is also one of the most right-winged. In this era, people who pursue pure magecraft the way he does no longer exist. All the others are pursuing the gifts of mundane riches. Prestige, desires, power . . . all these are wishes that can be fulfilled in this world."

"Isn't this great? These are all my favorite things."

"You are but the king who reigned over these uncouth ones, Gilgamesh."

Refusing to reply, Archer merely laughed and finished his delicious wine in a single gulp. He did not feel at all insulted by Kirei's evaluation.

"What about you, Kirei? What wish do you seek to fulfill after getting your hands on the Holy Grail?"

At such a direct question, Kirei hesitated for the first time.

"I . . ." Indeed; this was the most fundamental question of all. Why were the Command Seals engraved on Kotomine Kirei's left hand? "I . . . do not have any special wish."

At his vague reply, Archer's red pupils emanated a coquettish glow. "How can that be possible? I thought the Holy Grail only summons those who wished . . .?"

"That is how it should be. But . . . I am not sure of the reason either. Why would the Holy Grail choose me—someone without any ideals to achieve; without any cravings to fulfill? Why was I chosen?"

"Is this something worth such frustration?" Noticing his heavy look, Archer could not help but laugh loudly. "If it is not for any desire or ideal, won't mere pleasure-seeking be enough?"

"Damn you!" A subconscious fury burst within Kirei. "You want me, a disciple of God, to seek pleasure? How could I commit such a sinful act and doom myself to condemnation?"

"Sinful act? Condemnation?" Looking at Kirei's serious expression, Archer perceived more meaning to those words. He laughed; a sound devoid of goodwill. "Huh. That was a leap in logic, Kirei; why did you associate pleasure with sin?"

"That's because . . ." Kirei could not reply. He did not know how he had ended up in such an awkward situation, something he had never experienced before.

At Kirei's silence, Archer, became full of himself and commented. "Pleasure through sin is wrong, but humans do acquire happiness through virtuous means. To say that pleasure in itself is sinful; does that make any sense?"

Such an elementary question—why did he struggle to reply? The reason eluded Kirei. A nonchalant unease locked itself in unknown territory deep within his heart.

". . . Pleasures? I have none of that, and I will not seek it." Finally opening his mouth, Kirei answered in a voice unlike him, unsure and hesitating, like one who, failing to find a proper answer, hastily makes one up in reply.

Archer scrutinized him, then burst out in laughter. "Kotomine Kirei, I have sudden new-found interest in you."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just kidding. Don't mind me." Pouring himself another glass of red wine, he leaned back on the sofa, speaking loudly.

"Happiness is fundamentally a part of the human soul; the distinction is not between true and untrue, but between aware and unaware. Kirei, you failed to find it only in the depths of your heart. To experience happiness; that is the first thing to do."

"Mind you own business, Servant. Do you presume to educate me?"

"This is no ordinary education. It was learned by a king who experienced all the luxuries and pleasures of the world. Listen carefully."

Despite his snappy reply, Kirei was meticulously analyzing everything Archer said. Those haughty words sent shockwaves to his nerves for some reason.

"Kirei. First of all, you have to understand something about this thing we call 'entertainment.'"

"Entertainment?"

"Uh-huh. Limiting your views to the inside is not right. You must broaden your horizon . . . Oh yeah. Let's start by having you experience *my* entertainment. How does that sound?"

"There is no such thing as time for entertainment for me, not as I am right now." *I am different from you*, Kirei thought silently.

"Hey, don't say something like that. Once you accomplish Tokiomi's tasks, you will have lots of time, eh? Your duty is to dispatch spies to monitor the movements of the other five Masters, right?"

". . . That's right."

"In that case, don't just stop at their intentions and battle strategies; how about finding out their reasons for seeking the Holy Grail, and letting me know about them? That's not too hard for you, is it?"

Indeed, this type of investigation did not diverge much from the assignment Tokiomi gave him. Assassin, who observed the daily life of his target, could easily record their conversations. By analyzing the content of the dialogues, the reason they sought the Holy Grail could then be deduced easily. All he had to do was order this of Assassin.

". . . But Archer, why do you want to know this?"

"I mentioned it before, did I not? I am interested in the behaviors of human beings. And among those who fight for the Holy Grail, there has to be one or two interesting Masters, right? At least more interesting than Tokiomi is."

Kirei tried to cool his head and think rationally. He had only regarded Emiya Kiritsugu with interest, and completely ignored the rest. Besides, he was under no obligation to agree to Archer's request. However, if he could have some influence over this Servant who was completely out of Tokiomi's control, perhaps it would benefit the Tokiomi camp in future.

"Okay, Archer. I promise you. But this will take some time."

"No problem at all. I have the patience to wait."

Finishing the red wine, Archer rose from the couch. His movements caused the air to waver slightly, and the glow of the room fluctuated as well. This Heroic Spirit who controlled all the creations of the earth seemed to emanate an invisible radiance from his entire body.

"Ah, I will come again to taste your delicious wine. You collection can rival even the heavenly wines. It is wasteful to leave them gathering dust in a monk's storeroom."

Expressionless, Kirei did not reply; perhaps Archer took his silence as consent. With a satisfied smile, he left the room. The majestic atmosphere slipped away with him, and the room's mundane atmosphere returned. Finally alone, Kirei started to think on strange words from a strange visitor. It was the first time he had a one-to-one conversation with Archer.

Whether Servant or Master, all participants fought with all they had in this Heaven's Feel to fulfill certain wishes—save for

that uncontrollable King of Heroes, who apparently had no interest in the Holy Grail at all. Among the Servants gathered in Fuyuki City, he had to be the one with the least will to fight. From this perspective, perhaps he shared Kirei's sentiment—he had to be the only Master who participated in Heaven's Feel without any reason. No; perhaps his reason still exists, undiscovered. There had to be a craving for the Holy Grail to achieve certain miracles, maybe somewhere deep within his heart.

Nevertheless, this was definitely not the happiness Archer talked about. The answer lay not with Archer but with someone else—Emiya Kiritsugu. Everything would have been solved if the earlier conversation had been with Emiya Kiritsugu, thought Kirei. Of course, their positions were completely different. They would have discussed with weapons instead of words. But that was all right; it was all Kirei wanted, a fight with Emiya Kiritsugu—a conversation between men.

Kirei picked up the empty wine bottles tossed away by Archer, playing with these thoughts in his mind.

– 140:41:54

At the scene of the collapsed Fuyuki Hyatt hotel, the rescue team was working frantically throughout the night. Once the effect of Kiritsugu's magecraft had been dispelled, the evacuation personnel discovered that there were still two VIPs in the building when it collapsed.

Because they were on the top floor of the hotel when the incident happened, the rescue workers gave up all hope of finding them alive. Still, their bodies had to be found before they could throw in the towel. Under the bright-as-daylight mobilite, the rescue workers quickly cleared the rubble at the scene using excavators. By dawn, the rescue team was exhausted, having toiled throughout the night. At this moment, something strange happened.

"You said you found something strange?"

The rescue team chief reached the scene promptly. According to the workers, a silver sphere of about three meters in diameter had been found among the rubble. It did not look like part of the building materials at all from any perspective. It had just appeared suddenly in the midst of the rubble from nowhere.

"... Is this from the building? One of the accessories of the revolving restaurant on the top floor, perhaps?"

"Even then, this thing is perfectly intact. Isn't that weird?" On closer observation, its surface indeed revealed no signs of damage at all. Reflecting bright light just like a mirror, it seemed noewly polished.

"Why . . . does it look like mercury?" The bewildered chief voiced his thoughts as he put his hands on the surface of the sphere. At the first contact, surprisingly the sphere sank inwards. As the astonished chief scrutinised it further, he realized that he had not pressed inwards—he had merely touched it.

"Chief?"

Not noticing anything strange, the nearby rescue workers wore a puzzled expression and looked at their astounded-looking chief.

"Did anything happen?"

". . . We have to remove this thing from here."

"Huh?"

"Take it away on the truck. Hurry." The chief suddenly became unusually composed. In a calm voice, he instructed the workers to work swiftly. Though the workers were still slightly baffled, they understood that the object of unknown origin had to be removed from the scene immediately. They promptly heaved the silver sphere onto the shelves in the truck.

"Huh? Where's the chief?"

A rescue crew member abruptly noticed that the chief, overseeing them just seconds ago, had disappeared. From behind the busy rescue workers, the sound of an engine starting could be heard. In the driver's seat, slowly driving the truck away from the scene, was the expressionless chief. By the time this was noticed, it was already too late. The truck which carried the silver sphere had vanished among the dawn-lit streets.

Five hours later, on the outskirts of the city, a police patrol discovered the lost truck with the chief still sitting in the driver's

seat, unconscious. However, the truck which transported the silver sphere was left only an empty husk.

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"……"

"… Excuse me? Is this Mackenzie's house?"

"Yeah. This is the name of the owner of this house."

"… Then, who is … Sir King of Conquerors Alexander?"

"I am he."

"… Ah, ah. Err … I see. Ah, haha … ah. Then can you sign over here?"

"Sign? All right … done!"

"Thank you very much. So-sorry for disturbing."

"Hmm. No problem at all."

On the second-floor bedroom of Glen Mackenzie's house—one he was so accustomed to, he treated it as his own—Waver Velvet stirred from his dreams. The sun had fully risen. Treating the day as a holiday, he lay idly on the bed, refusing to get up. It would not hurt for him to laze around like this. Everything that had happened until now was like a dream—that unequalled, tragic death match and destruction.

But the engraved Command Seals on the back of his left hand reminded Waver that this was no dream. As Rider's Master, Waver had witnessed the fierce battle between the five Servants last night; this was undeniable fact. At that moment, for the first time in his life, this youth stepped into the battlefield, weaving between life and death. Trepidation, horror; he had never felt

them so strongly before. However, what remained in his heart at this moment . . . were not emotions arising from fear. Instead, impulses full of delight and excitement surged in his heart.

Waver accomplished nothing last night; every action was decided by Alexander alone. As a Master, he had only stood beside his Servant, witnessing everything from the side. Worse still, he had fainted at the climax of battle, rendering him unable to witness the final result of the fight. Nevertheless, Waver still felt it a very meaningful battle. The benefit and value he obtained were things only he understood.

". . . Not daring enough to even show up before me, coward; you are not fit to be my opponent at all . . ." That insult was delivered against Lancer's Master. Lord El-Melloi, someone Waver hated and feared, had been mocked as a coward by Rider. But the valor Rider held with pride was rash idiocy to Waver. Had he planned the battle strategy, he would let his Servant cross swords in the battlefield, whilst he would hide himself behind the curtain to observe the progress of the combat as a Master—the same tactic Kayneth used. That would be a proper battle tactic.

But . . . "The man most fitting to be my Master must be a valiant one who charges into the battlefield together with me." Of course, Waver was not the kind of person who could charge into the enemy beside Rider. Hiding beside the bridge, he was in reality so terrified that he scrambled into the chariot, wanting to escape immediately. However, this reaction had been mistaken as an act of valor.

Nonetheless, at this moment, such things need not be pursued any further. No matter his reasons, Waver could still clearly

remember the feeling of Rider's hand on his shoulder—so broad, so strong. "Yes. Such a person is my Master." Rider had really said that to him. Compared to Lord El-Melloi—the prodigy, the famous lecturer, someone to whom Waver could hold no candle to, Waver was way superior then. His value had been affirmed—come to think of it, this was the first time someone had acknowledged his ability.

Although praise and slander were but insubstantial words for this youth who had never been praised by anyone before, such words were really exhilarating. Waver was on seventh heaven right now. No matter how he tried, he could not contain his excitement. Though his Servant had failed to treat him with the courtesy demanded by a Master, and had always called Waver by his first name, no matter how disrespectful the obstinate brute was, Waver felt at least grateful toward him now. After all, Rider was the first one to value him.

"... ... ..." Tortured by such complicated thoughts, Waver stuffed his head under the covers. From this day on, what type of attitude should he employ toward that giant Servant of his?

—Waver suddenly realized that the usual morning snores beside his ears were absent. He lifted his head from the covers and found Rider, who usually slept on the bed, absent. Someone who abhorred spirit form would not simply revert to it without good reason. Besides, it was impossible for Waver not to feel his Servant's presence even when Rider was dematerialised. There could only one possibility—Rider was not in the house. Waver started to think calmly. He had overslept this morning, so it was not unusual for Rider to rise earlier than him. However, the

problem at hand was that Rider was not within the house, which meant that Rider had gone elsewhere alone without Waver's permission—

Footsteps could be heard coming up the stairs from the corridor. Such heavy footsteps could only belong to Rider; Waver was somewhat relieved. However, recognizing the meaning of such heavy footsteps, Waver paled immediately.

"Oh, so you are awake, eh, kiddo?"

Rider's voice was followed by his huge torso making its appearance at the door. And that thick suit of armor he was wearing—though Waver had gotten used to the strange circumstances, he still found it to be an alien and unimaginable thing. Were such a strange sight to be seen by the Mackenzie couple, the hypnosis he casted on them would be nullified very quickly, Waver feared. He had, with some difficulty, managed to convince the Servant—who downright refused to dematerialize—to stay on the first floor and not move around as he liked . . . Of course, that was the case until this morning.

". . . You . . . went downstairs dressed like this?"

"Don't be scared, okay? The old couple left early in the morning; there are only the two of us now. I went downstairs to pick up this express delivery package."

At least Rider knew to try his best not to be seen by the Mackenzie couple. Waver, slightly relieved, suddenly noticed something amiss. Nervously, he examined Rider from head to toe. In his giant hands was a small package with the express delivery label on it.

". . . You went to the main entrance in this costume?"

"I had no choice! We can't send the delivery man away without showing any gratitude, right?"

It was already too late. Luckily, no one staying nearby had noticed, apart from the postman who dropped by occasionally to deliver parcels. Still, it word would likely spread; hushed rumors of a warrior in Greek armor in this house. All he could do was pray that people would treat his words as a prank.

"Say, this isn't even your parcel; you didn't have to show your gratitude, did you?"

"Huh? No. It is my parcel."

"... What?!"

Rider showed off the parcel to Waver—"Fuyuki Town Miyami District, 228 Mackenzie Residence. To the King of Conquerors Alexander". The preposterous print was openly displayed on the post receipt. Under the Distributor column were the words "Specializing in Selling Character Goods: Animan Bar Nanbo Shop."

"What is this? Rider, explain yourself."

"I was just trying out this mail-order thing. There were quite a lot of products which caught my attention in the advertisement section of *World Military Monthly*."

"Eh? Mail-order?"

Waver finally understood why Rider further requested a postcard when he asked Waver to buy military magazines and recording tapes. At that time, Waver hadn't the faintest idea what the postcard was for ... No, Waver had not even considered it.

"I said, where on earth did you learn to mail-order?" Although Heroic Spirits could obtain knowledge from the Holy Grail, such

knowledge would not include learning how to use mail-order; Waver was reluctant to believe that was the case.

"Huh? such trifling things; wasn't it explained clearly at the back of the magazine and in the recording tapes? Just take a look and you'll understand."

"When did you see those advertisements . . . huh? Where did you get the money for the mail-order?"

"Don't worry. I have already paid in full." Laughing cheerfully, Rider returned Waver's wallet to him. Apparently, he had taken his Master's wallet without permission while he was sleeping.

He was so naïve that he had even wanted to buy a stealth bomber; no one would know what expensive merchandise he had purchased this time. Appalled, Waver took out his wallet and checked the sum of money inside, holding back his tears. The number of 10,000-yen notes inside were unchanged; only a few 1,000-yen notes were missing. Waver heaved a huge sigh of relief. Collapsing to his knees, Waver's fury at Rider for taking his wallet without permission quickly diminished. The teenager had no idea if he should think himself helpless: should he consider himself lucky or unlucky?

Meanwhile, Rider was beside Waver, happily humming a tone while opening the parcel. "Hoho!" He shouted in joy after opening it. "Not bad! Not bad! I like it very much. The real product looks even nicer than the one in the photographs."

". . . A T-shirt?"

Rider removed an XL-size T-shirt from the parcel. It looked just like another cheapskate product to Waver. On the front of the shirt, an eye-catching logo was printed atop the world map—"The

Admiral's Great Tactics." It looked like one of those products from the games section, on the front page of the special edition magazine.

"It's really not bad. Meeting Saber last night, I had sudden inspiration too. It would be all right with you if I dressed in contemporary clothes on the streets, wouldn't it?"

Waver's Heroic Spirit abhorred spiritual form and strongly preferred his physical form. Though the matter gave Waver headaches, there was at least a silver lining; Rider did not think to go window shopping in the streets. Now he was in deep trouble. Waver was so angry, he wanted to curse Saber and her Master to death for feeding Rider such an idea.

Meanwhile, Rider had tried on his new shirt and was making various poses, drawing simple happiness from it. "Wahaha! Just like what I wanted—the effect of having the whole world on my chest. Haha! Really makes me feel happy."

"... Ah, ahh. Yeah, yeah."

What if he continued to cover his head and sleep on it? He could banish the sight of an elated Rider, decked in a T-shirt, from his sight; he would escape back to his gentle sleep. It was the best idea Waver could think of. When he next got up again, the world would be a better place, right? Such a tempting notion had to be abandoned as Waver thought of what Rider would do next.

"... Hey Rider, wait. I said wait!"

Noticing that Rider was about swagger out of the house, the nervous Waver stopped him immediately.

"Where are you going?"

"Do you have to ask that? To the streets, of course. To show those peasants the new look of the almighty King of Conquerors."

To brave the cold November wind in a T-shirt was abnormal enough; Rider intended to do so in only a T-shirt.

"At least put on some trousers before you go out!"

"Huh? That thing that keeps making you stumble? Oh yeah. Come to think of it, everyone in this country wears that thing."

Looking slightly troubled, the brown giant, not even wearing underpants, held his forehead with his fist, whilst asking Waver seriously: "Do I really have to wear that?"

"That is a must."

Although he had not washed his face yet, Waver's sleepiness vanished like a puff of smoke. This inconsiderate, impenetrable-to-common-sense muscular idiot, lacking in manners like a gorilla . . . Thinking of the countless allowances he had made for the brute, Waver could not help but get angry.

"Let me get this clear. I won't go into the streets to get super-sized pants just for you. I definitely won't."

"What did ya say?"

With an exaggerated look, Rider stared at Waver. But Waver would not give in this time—he had set his determination with an iron will.

"Hey punk, are you going against my majestic achievements?"

"Your majestic achievements and your trousers are completely different things! Before you go out to enjoy yourself, show me what you can do! Kill at least one of the opponents' Servants!"

"Eh? You are quite an impatient fellow. You can engage a Servant in a combat anytime you want, you know."

"So do it now! Kill at least one of them! If you do that, I'll buy you trousers or anything you want."

With a solemn look, Rider suddenly fell silent.

"... Oh I see. Understood. For now, as long as I present you the decapitated head of the enemy, you swear that you would get me a pair of trousers?"

Against Rider who gave in with such surprising alacrity, Waver felt very helpless indeed.

"... So you really want to go to the street dressed only in this T-shirt?"

"Isn't the King of Knights doing the same? How could I, the King of Conquerors, lag behind? Whatever the case, I like the design of this shirt very much. It is fitting as a conqueror's outfit."

This tasteless idiot was praised by the generations as a hero; is this a wry joke from the historians of the past? Waver's train of thought tunneled through time and space and returned to the distant past.

At this exact moment, *Boom!* A ear-splitting explosion reverberated in Waver's ears.

No; to be specific, it was not a sound, but a hearing stimulus. It directly attacked Waver's sensitive magus nerves—in other words, a magecraft impulse.

"What was that? To the east."

Alexander also felt the stimulus distinctly. Through the open curtains, one could see a layer of cloud dispersing in the clear sky. Though the cloud pattern seemed to have been formed by fireworks, the twinkling glow belied its origin. Formed by

magecraft, those who were not magi would not be able to see it; this was true for the earlier noise as well. To a normal person, it looked and sounded just like ordinary fireworks.

"That's . . . where Fuyuki Church is, right?"

As one of the Masters participating in the Holy Grail War, Waver had at least some basic knowledge. He understood the meaning behind the signal immediately. The supervisor of Heaven's Feel, from the Holy Church, used that signaling fire whenever he had something crucial to inform the Masters of. This was the most appropriate means to inform the Masters, as the Holy Church had not the faintest idea where they would be.

"Is it something related to us?"

Waver struggled to find the best answer to Rider's question. "Can't say it has nothing to do with us. How should I put it . . ."

Waver had not declared his status as a Master to the Holy Church. As long as he had a Servant on Fuyuki City grounds, his position as a Master would naturally be established; there was no need at all to do things under the Church's thumb—Waver reasoned thus. After all, he had obtained the holy relic through unscrupulous means. If he did anything more, would he land himself into deep trouble? However, it would be safe if he ignored the convening called by the Fuyuki Church.

A meeting for all the Masters; what emergency could it be? Normally, it would be due to amendment of the rules, addition of extra conditions . . . Besides, it might also announce new information. This information could be the key to the coming battles. In this situation, it would be more beneficial if he listened to the supervisor's suggestions. If they were regulations which

would restrict him, all he had to do was ignore them when the time comes.

"Rider, we'll discuss the trousers some other time. I have other things to prepare right now."

"What are you so afraid of? It is hard to get such a nice weather for strolling."

Setting the disappointed Rider aside, Waver started his preparations.

– 138:15:37

A heavy atmosphere hung over the church pews. Noting the dense demonic aura in front of him, Father Kotomine Risei could not help but laugh bitterly. Around an hour had passed since the summoning signal's invocation. None of the Masters came to the Fuyuki Church; in place of them, five familiars were gathered. Apart from Kotomine Kirei, who appeared to have withdrawn from the war, and Caster's Master, Ryuunosuke, who was not able to see the signal, the other Masters had sent representatives. It seems none of the Masters were bothered about their etiquette toward the church.

Tousaka Tokiomi had also sent his familiar to the meeting. The rest of the familiars should have be dispatched by Einsbern, Matou and the two foreign Masters. This also proved that Lord El-Melloi, whose whereabouts were unknown after the Fuyuki Hyatt hotel explosion, was still alive.

"I had specially prepared the usual pleasantries of greeting, but it seems no one has come. I'll go straight to the point." With that simple opening, the old Father faced the congregation—free of humans—and continued.

"The War of the Holy Grail, which can achieve all of your wishes, is currently in great crisis. The Holy Grail is supposed to bestow power only to the Master and Servant who seek it, but there has been a betrayer. Ignoring the cardinal obligation of the Holy Grail, he and his Heroic Spirit misused the power granted to them, satisfy their frivolous desires instead." Risei did not care

about the response from the crowd; he was accustomed to preaching as a priest. Obviously, the congregation could only listen in silence. Coughing slightly, the old priest continued speaking.

"We discovered that Caster's Master is the man who is behind the serial killing and kidnapping incidents which had happened recently in Fuyuki City. He used his Servant to carry out his crimes, but neglected the crime scene after the deed, not even concealing his traces. What this act of severe violation of the rule of secrecy would bring—I guess you would understand without my explanation." Although there was no response from the familiars, the Masters who heard his words through their familiars should be wavering right now, at least slightly. Tokiomi had reacted the same way that morning; the usual reaction of a magus.

"He and his Servant are no longer just your enemies, but a general threat to the summoning of the Holy Grail. I therefore invoke my authority of supervision at this critical juncture to change the rules of the Holy Grail War temporarily." In a strict voice he declared, whilst pulling up his right sleeve, revealing his right arm. Although his body was old, the strong and muscular arm he once had during his younger days could still be seen. Tattoo-like images fully covered his arm between his elbow and wrist—No, those were not tattoos. The Masters participating in the War of the Holy Grail would know them on sight.

"These were collected from previous Holy Grail Wars, and entrusted to me as the supervisor for this Holy Grail War. The inheritance of the Masters who lost their Servants before the final

battle—their leftover Command Seals." With such proof, no one would doubt the authority of Father Risei as the supervisor. All the Command Seals not used in time were taken care of by him, the overseer.

Command Seals were also known as holy marks; proof that one had borne on one's back the fate of participation. Not only does it carry the significance of this fate, it is also a device to control Servants. The phenomenon of Command Seals was already a kind of miracle in itself. Although this crest on the Master's body possessed enormous power, Command Seals were still a form of exhaustible physical enchantment. Thus, they could be transplanted or transferred through incantations.

"I can transfer these reserve Command Seals to anyone at my discretion. All you who control your Servants, I guess you know the importance and value of these crests?" Although he was only facing familiars, messengers of duty, Father Risei slowly entered a state of preaching, and his excitement was aroused.

"All Masters should cease current hostilities. Everyone is to focus their efforts on destroying Caster. The Master who manages to annihilate Caster and his Master will be bestowed with additional Command Seals in this special circumstance. If accomplished alone, only one will be rewarded; if many cooperate, then all will be rewarded. Once I have verified Caster's destruction, the War of the Holy Grail will resume."

Father Risei rolled down his sleeve and further added. "If there are any questions, you may ask them now."

A commotion could be heard in the darkness. Moving chairs, beings getting up, beings leaving; the sounds mingled and then

gradually vanished. The announcement was fully understood by all. Lingering would be meaningless. The Masters had no questions for now—they had probably started preparing for the new competition. The church finally reverted to its truly human-free state. Father Risei pondered on future developments with a grin. With these instructions, all he had to do now was wait. Those four hungry hounds would surely drive Caster to desperation.

The targeted Master's identity and the location of Caster's workshop were already known. If the other Masters were informed, the job could be done more efficiently. However, if not handled carefully, it might arouse their suspicion. It was not yet time to reveal the intelligence Assassin had gathered.

How long could Caster keep this up? Risei and Kirei both felt the current situation would not become a six-versus-one siege immediately. In his opinion, it would be difficult for the other Masters to naïvely follow the supervisor's instructions, focusing on Caster as their main target. The hunt for Caster was but a mere interlude for them; their real goal was still to succeed in the ensuing dogfights.

Everyone craved Command Seals. But if their opponents earned the same reward, they would gain no advantage. These Masters would rather destroy Caster on their own to gain sole advantage instead of cooperating to obtain the Command Seals together, even if the latter would be much easier. They might even obstruct each other in competition. That would be troublesome; it might put Archer in a disadvantageous position.

All the Masters' movements would be under the watchful eyes of Assassin, someone they had almost forgotten. Kirei's duty had

been executed beautifully. A magus who had learned magecraft at the last minute in a few days, his ability to control his Servant so superlatively was something even his teacher Tokiomi could not have imagined.

For the sake of his belief, for the tenets of the Church, and for the sake of his promise to his deceased friends; The child, brimming with self-confidence, exhausted all he had, using his talents to the fullest. A great achievement indeed, something even his father failed to accomplish.

Act 6

– 131:23:03

Head due west, through Fuyuki's busy streets, for about thirty kilometers. There stands the state highway, oriented east—west, cutting through tall mountains far removed from villages, devoid of human presence. A stretch of dense forest occupied both sides of the highway. seemingly overlooked by the torrential upsurge of land development.

Perhaps the land was state-owned? No; according to its register, it appears to be privately owned by an overseas company of dubious existence. If one insisted on investigating this land, this legendary urban myth would be the first baffling thing one encounters.

It was rumored that in the deepest part of this dense forest, there existed a legendary castle. Of course, the myth was only a boring fairytale. Although the forest remained undeveloped, it was still only about an hour's drive from Fuyuki City. If such an outlandish castle truly existed, everyone would know about it. In fact, numerous land surveys have been conducted in this primeval

forest, and no trace of human structures was ever discovered. But every few years, the myth would be revived again.

A group of children once walked into this forest half-playfully, half-exploring; another time, it was a lost hitchhiker. They each saw an ancient castle appear suddenly from the dense fog; it was built out of rock, and immensely spectacular. No one lived inside the castle and it appeared to be abandoned. But inside, there were all sorts of utilities, and everything was in perfect order; one could not but think humans indeed lived there. These same rumors claim it was an extremely uncanny ancient castle. Obviously, no one believed it. It could not have been anything more than a story cooked up by tabloids in want of news material; a one-page summer special feature devoted to strange tales.

Only a number of magi knew the castle really existed. The castle welcomed only the owner who entered to participate in the war every sixty years; after all, it was a castle created by magecraft. It was enveloped in multiple layers of illusions and bounded fields, and would never be exposed to the outside except in rare accidents. This is a strange space of existence. Those who knew of the castle's existence called this dense forest the Einsbern forest.

When Fuyuki hosted the Heaven's Feel, Jubstacheit, the head of the Einsbern family, felt it inappropriate to establish an outpost on the land belonging to their archrival, the Tousaka family. He made full use of his clan's financial power, buying all the leyline-covered grounds closest to Fuyuki, and established it as the Einsbern family's headquarters. That was near the beginning of

the third Heaven's Feel, which also coincided with the tense and dangerous times just before the onset of the Second World War.

This broad primeval forest was covered in a bounded field, and completely isolated from the outside world. The Einsbern family transferred everything from the original castle to this forest. This demonstration of the Einsberns' immense financial means and their persistence in pursuing the Holy Grail would put to shame the Tousakas' negotiations for land purchase in Fuyuki and their efforts at concealment.

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The dense atmosphere caused Irisviel to sigh repeatedly.

"Are you tired, Iri?" Kiritsugu asked. Irisviel hid her melancholic expression and shook her head with a smile.

"It's nothing. I'm not tired. Keep going." Irisviel urged him.

Kiritsugu continued to talk about all sorts of intelligence concerning Fuyuki City. A map portraying the entire Fuyuki City was spread on the table before him.

"Two locations comprise the heart of the entire area. One is the residence of the Second Master, Tousaka. The other goes without saying; that is Mount Enzou. All the leylines in the surrounding area gather at Mount Enzou. The details are just as Head of the Household, Acht, had said—"

Servants had arrived at the castle before Irisviel et al., and had prepared everything at the meeting place before leaving. Therefore, the place where the meeting was being held was immaculate. Not a speck of dust was to be found anywhere from

table legs to tea cups, and vases were filled with lively flowers. It was impossible to imagine that no one had lived here for sixty years.

Though she could not say she was not tired, Irisviel had at least gotten some rest in bed; Kiritsugu, on the other hand, had not rested for even one minute. It was already almost noon when Kiritsugu and his assistant Hisau Maiya reached the castle. As soon as they arrived, they set about receiving the summons from Fuyuki Church, controlling familiars, confirming the notice from the supervisor, and so on. Kiritsugu dealt with all these hassles without pause. Last night, after the battle at the warehouses, Kiritsugu and company attacked Lancer's Master Kayneth, and even encountered Kotomine Kirei. Another fierce battle ensued. Yet, Kiritsugu did not show even a sliver of exhaustion. She had no grounds for weariness. No. She had other, hidden reasons for that sigh.

"A powerful bounded field has been established, with the Ryuudouji temple on top of Mount Enzou as its base. Apart from Servants, all other natural creatures can only enter the bounded field through the mountain path. Saber needs to be careful of this when she's moving."

These words of caution should have been addressed to Saber directly. However, Kiritsugu did not take so much as a glance at the girl dressed in masculine attire and standing behind Irisviel. The air grew stagnant and heavy, as Saber displayed an attitude of stubbron rejection toward Kiritsugu. This attitude of Saber's as not new, but only grew more obvious since they arrived at the Einsbern castle.

"Apart from these two locations, there are two more key positions in Shinto where the leylines gather. One is the Fuyuki Church on top of the southern hill, and the other is the new housing development to the east of the central business district. In summary, there are four key spiritual grounds in Fuyuki where the Holy Grail's descent can be carried out."

"Then, once the war enters the ending phase and the number of Servants have been whittled down, we must take control of one of these locations?"

"Correct. Any questions concerning the topography?"

"... Saber, is there anything you are not certain of?" Irisviel tactfully tried to rouse her interest. The girl Servant smiled and shook her head.

"Nothing in particular. It was a sufficient explanation." It was a sarcastic, flippant reply, but Saber seemed unaware of her own tone.

With a sigh, Irisviel continued. "So, as for our policies from now on ... It seems all the other Masters will hunt down Caster first. Right, Kiritsugu?"

"Yeah, that seems to be the case. The supervisor did hint that there would be compensation for the effort." A while ago, Kiritsugu told them about the announcement from the Fuyuki Church, and the supervisor's revision of the rules; the perverse nature of the Servant Caster and the supervisor's backing in stopping him.

"However, it would be more advantageous if we did not join the other Masters. After all, as of this moment, we are the only ones

who know his true name—Baron Gilles de Rais." Kiritsugu, his lips crooked by a cynical smile, continued.

"He must have lost his mind if he's prowling after Saber like that, fancying her to be Joan of Arc. he could prove useful. We won't need to drive him away; we'll just set our nets and wait."

"Master, that is not enough." That was the cold, objecting voice of Saber, who had thus far been secluded from the discussion.

"Knowing Caster's personality, if we do nothing and watch, the number of innocent victims will only increase. His misdeeds are unacceptable. We should force him out before the damage spreads." Saber hoped her sincere words would reach Kiritsugu's heart; it was futile. Kiritsugu, ignoring Saber as usual, spoke again.

"It'll be fine, Iri. We found no openings in the boundary field, and the alarm and scanning systems have already been checked . . ."

Biting her lip, Saber's expression grew grimmer as she stared as Kiritsugu. She could endure his cold treatment, the righteous indignation that he would let Caster do as he wished was too much. Of course, Emiya Kiritsugu could not be less concerned by Saber's stare.

"We weren't going to use the castle this time, but the situation has changed. Until we can lure Caster in, we will hold our position in this fortress."

"But Kiritsugu, don't we need to think of a way to deal with Lancer first?" Irisviel countered on behalf of the ignored Saber. "It has been eight hours since you defeated Lord El-Melloi, yet Saber's left hand still won't heal."

"If the curse of that spear doesn't disappear, it means Lancer is still fine. Unlike Archer with his Independent Action skill, the Servant Lancer cannot remain for a long time in the present world without a Master." Kiritsugu quickly nodded to what his wife was pointing out.

"That's certain. Perhaps Lancer formed a contract with a new Master, or I had failed in killing Kayneth . . . I was hindered and could not confirm his death."

"If so, in order to face Caster more safely, don't we need to defeat Lancer first?"

However, faced with Irisviel's continuous questions, Kiritsugu shook his head. "There is no need to confront Caster directly. All you need to do is take advantage of the terrain. Saber will just retreat and confuse the enemy's line of sight."

Irisviel was shocked. When Saber heard this from Kiritsugu, she was gaping with anger. "Not . . . fighting Caster?"

"All the other Masters have set their aim on Caster. Someone is bound to deal with Caster without us having to lift a finger. There is no need for extra effort. Caster is rich picking for all those Masters who are chasing Caster with bloodshot eyes, and his eyes are on Saber. If Caster makes a move, one or two of the Masters pursuing him would definitely set foot in this forest. We will attack these Masters from the side. The Masters, fully focused on Caster, would never think to be wary of being the hunted." A characteristic Kiritsugu strategy. In Kiritsugu's eyes, there were neither human morals, nor the pride of being a magus. He was only a predatory machine performing to the mantra of survival of the fittest.

Kiritsugu originally had not planned to come to the castle. Irisviel finally understood the intentions behind his sudden change of plans, and his joining forces with her.

"Master, you ... just how despicable can you get?!" Saber rebuked loudly and angrily, and Irisviel also felt a faint pang in her heart. Saber's indignation right now was not the same anger she expressed at Rider's mockery and Caster's boasting—it was a more righteous, furious anger.

"Master Emiya Kiritsugu, this is an insult to Heroic Spirits. I only joined this war to avoid spilling rivers of blood. To fight for the Holy Grail, without meaningless bloodshed, with minimal sacrifice; to have one person take up the mission of fate in place of armies of men ... this is what we Servants should do. Why don't you give me the responsibility of joining the battle? You were just like that when you attacked Lancer's Master last night. One misstep had resulted in a disaster. I have already made a deal with Lancer to fight again! We have no need of such despicable tactics —or does Master Kiritsugu have no faith in me, his Servant?"

Kiritsugu did not reply. He maintained an indifferent silence, as though Saber's furious words were mere trifles. Irisviel felt a deep-seated hate for that mask-like expression of indifference on Kiritsugu's face. That man was not the husband she knew. Indeed, she knew Emiya Kiritsugu had dual personalities. She realised that on the one hand Kiritsugu invested all his emotions to his wife and daughter, and on the other hand he hid the scars of the past in his heart. She knew something of the kind of life he had lived before entering the Einsbern family. But was that the decisive factor causing the split between them?

The woman clad in black who was present in the meeting; she spoke not a word, and silently entrusted all of herself to Kiritsugu. She was the other reason for Irisviel's melancholy. It was not the first time; she had met Hisau Maiya a few times in the Einsbern castle. It was Hisau Maiya who managed all of Kiritsugu's worldly businesses outside during the nine years of Kiritsugu's seclusion. This was a woman who worked with Kiritsugu before Irisviel met him. Throughout the meeting, she expressed no doubt at Kiritsugu's words, only keeping her silence. Perhaps, for Maiya, the Kiritsugu right now was the Emiya Kiritsugu she knew.

Suddenly, a faint aroma wafted into Irisviel's nose; it was the smell of tobacco. That scent of tobacco had always been with Kiritsugu, from the day she met him. Irisviel still remembered that she detested that smell a lot back then. It was long since she smelt that scent; not since she married Kiritsugu. Now, the scent of tobacco had returned. Perhaps that is the gunpowder smell of the battlefield.

No doubt, he had returned to the Kiritsugu of nine years ago. Back then, Acht had taken Kiritsugu in to win the Holy Grail. Kiritsugu was like a cruel and merciless hound then, and Irisviel was merely a doll guarding the Holy Grail. Recalling Kiritsugu's past, Irisviel felt herself returning to her own past, felt their nine years together fading away. Her heart grew fretful and restless. Right now, the one closest to Emiya Kiritsugu was not her, his wife, but Hisau Maiya . . .

Quickly setting her thoughts aside, Irisviel asked an irrelevant question. "... How should we deal with the new rule of the war

the supervisor had proposed? Did he not want us to enter a ceasefire with all enemies apart from Caster?"

"Ignore that new rule. The supervisor only mentioned the rewards for abiding by the new rule, not the punishment for breaking it. If he pesters us about it, we will just feign ignorance." Unlike his attitude toward Saber, Kiritsugu replied to Irisviel's questions thoroughly.

"Besides, it just doesn't feel like the supervisor of this war can be trusted and respected. From the way he hid Assassin's Master and pretended to know nothing about it, he is probably on Tousaka's side. Before we figure out everything about him, we should regard him with much doubt."

"..." Saber shook with fury, and countless thoughts roamed in Irisviel's heart. For a moment, the two sank into silence. Kiritsugu took this as the sign to end the meeting.

"Then the meeting's over. Irisviel and I will remain in the castle and prepare for Caster's assault. Maiya is to return to the city and gather intelligence. Report any changes to me."

"Yes Sir."

Maiya nodded unhesitatingly, stood up, and left the meeting room. Kiritsugu stood up a while later, gathered the map and documents on the table, and also left the room, without a glance at Saber. Saber, completely ignored, bit her lip and stared at the carpet beneath her feet. Only Irisviel remained with Saber in the meeting room, but she had no words to soothe Saber's temper.

No; the proud King of Knights would not expect useless words of comfort anyway. For Saber, the only necessity now was to resolve the problem at its root. Irisviel put a grateful hand on

Saber's shoulder, and left the meeting room, chasing Kiritsugu. That cold shoulder—it was not just from the difference in their beliefs. Kiritsugu would not be ignoring her so deliberately were he not under such extreme hatred or anger. He had overdone it this time. No matter how much their strategies differed, they were still companions fighting for a common goal. Mutual respect was not strictly required, but humiliation was uncalled for.

Irisviel soon found Kiritsugu standing on the balcony overlooking the front garden of the castle; he was leaning on the railing and looking out into the night forest. Maiya was not with him; Irisviel breathed a sigh of relief.

"... Kiritsugu."

Irisviel spoke as she approached Kiritsugu's back. Her voice sounded more severe than she imagined it to be. Kiritsugu, seemingly feeling her presence, turned around slowly without surprise. She was prepared. Just then, when Kiritsugu confronted Saber in the meeting room, he had a look of such cruelty in his eyes; Irisviel steeled herself for that cruel gaze. However, as Kiritsugu turned, she caught his countenance, was stricken with helplessness, and stood rooted to the ground.

She saw before her a hurt and helpless child, holding back his tears, driven up against a wall. The Kiritsugu standing before Irisviel right now was so very distant from that powerful magus killer; he was only a weak and cowardly man.

"Kiritsugu, you—"

Without a word, Kiritsugu hugged the confused Irisviel tightly. His chest was shaking. To Irisviel, her husband's shoulders were always strong and powerful, shoulders to lean on,

but now he was helpless as a baby sheltering in the arms of a gentle mother.

"If I—"

He hugged her tighter; she was beginning to hurt. Then he asked weakly in her ear.

"Right now, if I dropped everything and ran away from here—Iri, will you leave with me?"

Irisviel had never imagined that Emiya Kiritsugu would ask such a question. She remain in shocked silence for a long while, and then replied:

"Ilya . . . she is still in the castle. What about her?"

"We go back to the castle and bring her out. All who stand in our way will be killed."

That was a crisp reply—as despairing as it is short. Kiritsugu was not joking.

"After that—I'll give everything I have for our family. I'll protect you and Ilya with my life."

Irisviel finally understood his conundrum. Kiritsugu, her partner, was facing the greatest battle in his life, and had already been forced on a road of no return. He was no longer the Kiritsugu from nine years ago; no longer that cold and emotionless hound, no longer that killing machine who endlessly chastened himself. Kiritsugu had changed. Greatly weakened, he even put himself in such a situation to achieve that very cruel ideal. And she was the key that brought this change.

Wife and daughter—they were not meant to be swept into Emiya Kiritsugu's life.

He was originally one with nothing to lose. He could not even feel pain. Such a man could be extraordinarily strong, could pursue the immense ideal of saving the world, could sacrifice everything for it without hesitation, and become a soldier of boundless cruelty. Right now, Kiritsugu wanted to go back to that past, back to the man he was before. But he found himself at an impasse. These nine years had completely changed Kiritsugu; he was already enduring a huge amount of pressure and pain just to maintain the look of cruelty and heartlessness he had before. Kiritsugu's cold treatment of Saber was his exposure. Already exhausted from trying to preserve himself, he had no energy to accept Saber, not even to communicate with the King of Knights.

Irisviel's heart ached. Her beloved was being tormented, and there was nothing she could do. What could she do? She, the cause of all that anguish? All she could do now was to weakly raise her doubts.

"Will we be able to run? We—"

"We can. There is still a chance."

Kiritsugu replied, a little too hastily to be believed; he only wanted to cherish that illusory hope.

"—You're lying." Irisviel pointed that out, gently yet cruelly. "That's impossible. Emiya Kiritsugu, it's impossible for you to run away. To give up the Holy Grail, and the ideal of saving the world; you will definitely not forgive such a self. You will definitely be the final judge and declare the death penalty for yourself."

Kiritsugu finally cried out. He understood that too. He had no choices left since a long time ago.

"I'm so scared . . ." Kiritsugu sobbed, speaking his heart like a child.

"That man, Kotomine Kirei, has me squarely in his sights. Maiya told me that. He used Kayneth as bait to lure me onto his hook. He's already guessed all my plans . . . I may lose the battle. I sacrificed you, and left Ilya aside, but still . . . that most dangerous person had already aimed his weapons at me. That guy is the enemy I least want to meet!"

Emiya Kiritsugu, neither hero nor warrior—a killer. He had not the courage and pride to battle others with his life on the line—a coward. His goal was to ensure his victory and survival, cautiously and with the least risk. For the hunter, the worst nightmare was to be hunted by another. The Kiritsugu of nine years ago would have crafted the best solution calmly, without so much as lifting an eyebrow. That was the terror of one who had no loved ones to lose. But for Kiritsugu now, the fear of losing his loved ones became his fatal weakness.

"I won't let you fight alone." Irisviel said gently as she caressed her husband's trembling back. "I'll protect you. Saber will also protect you. And. . . Maiya will also be beside you."

Kiritsugu needed Maiya most right now; Irisviel was forced to admit that. Only Maiya could reawaken the tenacious toughness sealed away in the depths of Kiritsugu's heart, and recall the cruel and heartless personality Kiritsugu had many years ago. But Irisviel would never mention this to Kiritsugu. If there was something she could do, it would be to embrace him and give him some temporary solace. However . . . Irisviel prayed silently in her heart. It mattered not if her prayers were paid no heed. She

prayed that she could embrace Kiritsugu just a while longer, even for a minute or a second. She would cure Kiritsugu's pain the best she could with her limited strength ... Her prayers and their embrace faded into emptiness.

Irisviel's chest suddenly throbbed intensively, and her entire body tensed uncontrollably. Regular, intensive vibrations pulsed in her Magic Circuits as soon as she held the forest's bounded field within her own magecraft. That was the alarm.

"... Here already?" Her husband muttered beside her ear. Calmly, he returned to the resolute and cruel tone she still had not gotten used to. Kiritsugu detected the change on his wife's expression. Irisviel nodded silently and left her husband's embrace. The cruel countenance of that Magus Killer once again reappeared in front of her eyes.

"Fortunately, he came before Maiya left. Now we can take him face on. Irisviel, prepare the crystal ball for distant vision."

"Right."

Things were moving much earlier than expected. The whirlwind of battle began to blow in the forest.

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"He has appeared."

The main players of the Einsbern camp—Kiritsugu, Maiya, and Saber—once again gathered in the meeting room. Before the three of them, Irisviel projected the image of the invader captured by the bounded field onto the crystal ball. The invader donned an inky black cassock, and an evil aura reeled about it. Also, the

crimson red patterns on the cloth seemed sanguine, wavering in and out of view in the forest.

"Is this Caster?"

It was the first time Kiritsugu had seen Caster. Irisviel nodded in his direction. The figure reflected on the crystal ball was indeed the weird Heroic Spirit that stopped Saber last night.

"But what is he going to do?"

What puzzled Irisviel was the group of people Caster was leading behind him. Caster had not acted alone this time. It seemed there were roughly ten people behind him, sauntering forward in the forest. The group consisted of young children; even the oldest seemd to be of primary school age. The children wobbled as they walked, seemingly somnambulating, while Caster walked in front, leading them onward. Those children were definitely under the influence of Caster's magecraft. Caster must have obtained notice of the supervisor's announcement, and kidnapped the children from Fuyuki and its surroundings.

"Iri, what's his location?"

"Within two kilometres northwest of the castle. It looks like Caster has no intention of heading further into the forest."

The bounded field in the forest was a circle, five kilometers in diameter, centered on the castle. Caster's location was at the edge of this bounded field. If Caster went any deeper, Irisviel would be able to support Saber in battle. However, Caster started travelling the perimeter of the bounded field, as though guessing Irisviel's intentions.

"Irisviel, the enemy is baiting us to come out." Saber said resolutely. She would arrive at Caster's location on foot in mere

minutes. Irisviel felt likewise. Saber was extremely anxious, and eager to head out and smash Caster. But the King of Knights could not do as she wished. The group of children gathered behind Caster; that was the reason for her anxiety.

"Hostages . . . right? Definitely so." Irisviel muttered dejectedly.

Saber nodded. "Triggering the pre-set traps and machinations would harm those children. Only if I go and defeat Caster can these children be saved."

The situation was clear without further explanation. However, Irisviel also had reason for hesitating. Saber's wound put her at great disadvantage, and letting her fight Caster like this was cause for worry. Irisviel instinctively deduced that Caster was a tough enemy. She would not be able to support Saber from outside the bounded field. Letting Saber fight alone in such a situation . . .

Just then, Caster's beast-like eyes suddenly looked up. Could he have sensed Irisviel's clairvoyant abilities? Caster stared in Irisviel's direction, flatteringly lifted his arms, and bowed. It was such a simple thing to do for the magus Heroic Spirit.

"I came here specially to visit you per my promise last night." The surface of the solid crystal ball began to waver, and sound from the surveillance location was transmitted. "Now, please give the order; let me be in the presence of that beautiful Holy Maiden again."

Saber stared at Irisviel, urging her to quickly give a command —the Servant was already prepared to fight. The only one hesitating was her Master.

As though sensing Irisviel's thoughts, Caster showed an expression of scorn, laughed like one in a one-man act, and said: "... Ah, it seems you still can't make up your mind. I expected to wait a long time too, so just take your time making preparations. C'mon, this is such a boring game—could I borrow a corner of your territory?"

Caster clicked his fingers. The children obediently following Caster all this while opened their eyes, as though waking up from a dream. They looked about themselves helplessly, unable to figure out where they were.

"Listen, children. We're gonna play hide-and-seek. The rules are simple. Just run away from me. If I catch you—" Caster's hand stretched out from the sleeve of the cassock with a swish, and caught a child beside him.

"Stop!" Saber knew that her prevention would have no effect, yet she could not help but yell out. A skull shattered hollowly, brain matter sprayed in all directions, and eyeballs slid down in the air. The nightmarish scene engraved itself in each vision. The children let out a harrowing scream and scattered everywhere. Caster, standing in the middle, laughed loudly and happily, licking his bloody fingers with his tongue. "Hurry up and run. I'm gonna start chasing you after I count to a hundred. So, Jeanne, before I catch all these children, how long will you take to prepare?"

Irisviel hesitated no more at this scene; she could not afford delay. She, too, had a child—the small and pitiful frame of the unfortunate child was exactly the same size as her own daughter Ilya's.

"Saber, defeat Caster for me."

"Yes Sir."

The King of Knight's reply was curt. By the time she heard it, Saber had already disappeared, leaving only a wind of extraordinary rage.

– 130:55:11

Like a gust of roaring wind, Saber burst through the forest. She no longer fretted over her disagreements with Kiritsugu. On the battlefield, her heart would become a sword, whetted to unmatched keenness, a sword with nary a doubt.

Saber was well aware she was dashing into Caster's array of magecraft. Her blood boiled; the evils this devil committed had incensed her. But fury alone would not have propelled her, would not have forged her heart of sword. Those slaughtered children... it was not her first time witnessing such a scene. For one who lived on the battlefield, those diminutive corpses—an unbearable sight for anyone—are an inescapable reality. Even more so to one who was once King Arthur.

These beings known as humans, tottering on the edge of life and death, were incomparably ugly, despicable and violent; these two-legged beasts that ravished women, slaughtered children, and robbed the poor. Nine times out of ten, the blood-stained battlefield would be filled with such demons. For that reason, one must prove oneself human even in the depths of Hell. Humans need living testimony that humans can rise above their difficulties with dignity.

The knight is that living testimony—the shining star on the battlefield. A knight inspires awe with his justice, and proudly illuminates the entire battlefield. inspired by his actions, those fallen souls reduced to demons may once again pick up their honor and pride, and become proper humans once more. To set

aside anger, sadness and anguish, and focus on the greater good: that is a knight's duty.

Saber must defeat Caster, urged not by anger but duty. Her actions certainly lacked consideration; it could not be helped if she were to be rebuked for hastiness. Although she predicted Caster would be a tough enemy, she did not despair; she was not lacking in capacity for thought, and she held on to the hope of victory. Were this a fight to the death, she would be the one standing. Kiritsugu aside, Saber had her reasons for desiring Caster's defeat. She would subdue that devil under risk of grevious injury. This was the duty of the King of Knights, an inescapable obligation. A devil that sullied the honour of war, a scum that humiliated human pride—she would not let such a person go.

The stench of blood thickened. Mud wrapped about the edge of her armor, stopping her steps. Behind, the ground was obscured by stirred dust, soaked through with dampness—not the dampness of rain, but crimson blood. It was a sickening stench. A sea of blood surrounded her. What kind of cruel slaughter did Caster enact to create such a scene? Saber's heart was rent at the thought. The slaughtered ones were all young and lovely children. Saber remembered the vision of them, screaming with terror, in the crystal ball. That scene was only minutes old, taking place just before Saber burst into the forest. In those short minutes, the lively children became scattered carcasses.

"You're finally here, Jeanne. I have waited a long time." Caster greeted the stationary silver-white figure with a hearty smile. A complacent smile was plastered on his face, betraying his satisfaction with the lavish banquet. Caster stood amidst this sea

of blood; his inky black cassock was covered with the fresh blood of the hostages, making his smile more spooky and terrifying.

"What of this tragic scene? Mortifying? Could you even imagine the anguish those innocent, lovely children underwent at their end? Jeanne, this is no tragedy; not yet. Compared to my loss of you, to meet you again—"

Saber had neither reply nor intent to listen. She wanted only to cleave Caster with a blow. Without hesitation, she took a step forward. Sensing the killing intent in that advancing step, Caster stopped talking, and suddenly pulled his hands out from the edges of his cassock. Watching the thing held in front of Caster's chest, Saber once again stopped her advance.

It was a child—the sole surviving hostage. He was still sobbing weakly as Caster's forearms held him close. Did Caster leave him alive to use as a shield in the battle against Saber?

"Oh, Jeanne, your flaming, angry eyes are so appealing." Caster, feeling relaxed, smiled briefly toward Saber. "Do you hate me so much? Yes, you should hate me. I have betrayed the mercy and love of God, and you would never forgive me for that. You were truly more devoted to God than any other."

"Let the child go." A tone cold and keen as a blade. "This competition for the Holy Grail selects the Heroic Spirit most worthy of obtaining the Grail. Using strategies that sully a Heroic Spirit's honour will cause the Holy Grail to abandon you."

"Since you have been resurrected, the Holy Grail is useless to me. Jeanne, if you really want to save this child's life . . ."

Caster could not help his bursts of laughter. With an expression of disappointment, he softly released his grip and placed the child on the ground.

"Do not cry, child; rejoice. God's devoted disciple came to save you. The omnipotent God finally answered to your wishes. None of your friends received God's salvation, except you."

The young child, seemingly understanding that the blonde girl who had sprinted here was his saviour, began to cry loudly at once, and started running toward Saber. His little hands clasped her shin guard, and Saber softly brushed the child's hands with her fingertips. Her situation was now desperate; she could not prepare for battle and ensure the child's safety at the same time. Only the surrounding mountains could protect the child and put her heart at ease.

"It is dangerous here. Get away quickly. Run that way until you see a big, big castle. There are people in there who will help—" *Clack*—the child's spine made a sound. Sobs became painful wails. Saber was shocked speechless; the little figure burst apart before her eyes. What gushed out from the child was not red blood . . .

It was an inky bundle of snakes, countless snakes intertwined together—no, it was covered with suckers the size of fish gills; no mere a bundle of snakes. Octopi, perhaps? Or the tentacles of some strange octopus-like creature? Those tentacles, as thick as Saber's arms, extended in a flash and wrapped themselves around the silver armor, constricting Saber's arms and legs. The hostage's flesh and blood clung onto the demonic monsters summoned from another world—there was more than one of them. Endless tentacles continued to emerge from the remains of the hostages

scattered everywhere, and almost immediately Saber found herself surrounded by a dozen or so of the monsters.

They were roughly the same size, limbless and lacking a lower body—a verbal description is difficult. Each tentacle ended in a circular mouth, an orifice containing razor teeth like a shark's. Their origins were unknown, but they were certainly not living creatures of nature; perhaps creatures from another world, one that does not obey the natural laws.

"I recall telling you beforehand that you should make ample preparations the next time you see me." Caster laughed a loud, celebratory laugh. As he spoke, a thick book appeared in his hands. Its cover was glistening wet. To Saber's disbelief, a piece of human skin was placed on it. Though an ordinary book by its cover, Saber's lightning-like senses, feeling the massive amount of prana surging and expanding around the book, told her that book was Caster's Noble Phantasm.

"This is the magical book my friend and ally left for me. Through it, I obtained the means to lead armies of demons. What do you think? Can any army stand up to the majesty of my demonic army?"

Saber remained tightly bound. The formless carcass, rotten and smashed, was still in her hands. These demonic monsters consume the flesh of their hosts as they emerge; the carcass remains did not impart any solid sense of weight. The child, crying and clutching her clothes a moment ago, was already reduced to this tragic state.

"Enough. I wish no longer to compete with you for the Grail."

Saber, Servant of the sword, announced quietly, and released the raging anger bridled in her heart. The monsters began to

retreat. The impact brought a force to Caster's eardrums unmatched by any physical shockwave. What erupted from the slender girl was a yell of blood-churning anger, heralding a huge burst of prana. The binding tentacles, succumbing to the prana burst before the second was up, disintegrated into slivers of flesh, and scattered out of sight. Not a trace of slime lingered. The silver armor regained its brilliant shine. Amid the hordes of demonic monsters, the girl stood like a god of war, and glared at Caster with blazing eyes.

"I seek nothing in this battle, and ask no reward. Right now, this sword in my hands was made to eliminate you."

"Ohhhh, Jeanne . . ." Caster, awed by Saber's majesty, began to gasp weakly. His expression was not one of doubt or fear; he looked slightly lost and confused. "So noble, so just . . . Oh Holy Maiden, even gods fall in shame before you!"

Caster's voice, extraordinarily happy, suddenly lapsed into silence. Taking the cue, the fragile tentacles lashed toward Saber like an avalanche.

"I have stained my love! I haven sunken into love's bog! Oh Holy Maiden!"

The swinging sword and mad laughter lifted the curtains of another battle to the death.

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Irisviel held her breath and gazed unblinkingly at the battle through the crystal ball. The uncanny matter Saber had predicted was obvious. Due to the special abilities of Servant classes, Saber

had an overwhelming advantage over Caster in battle. As a Heroic Spirit of the Sword, her magic resistance was increased by magnitudes. Caster, employing magecraft as his main weapon against Saber, would stand no chance. But—

Caster was a magus who could summon evil demons. Saber's magic resistance ability was only activated when she became the target of magecraft; it could not stop Caster summoning monsters from other worlds. Moreover, once the monsters were summoned, they constituted a threat different from magecraft. The monsters' teeth and curved claws dealt physical damage like swords. The only tools Saber had against them were her sword and body. Even so, Saber, the mightiest in armed battle, would not fear mere monsters summoned from another world—were she without wounds. The battle of the forest reflected in the crystal ball was not an optimistic situation.

Repelling the continuous attacks of the monstrous tentacles, Saber yielded not a step, maintaining her swift and ferocious attacking posture. Each swing of her invisible sharp sword cleaved monsters apart in the air. The tentacle horde did not manage a single step. Saber held back wave after wave; unyielding defense took all her might, and she was in a tight spot. Caster merely stood a distance off, where Saber could not reach him. New monsters and accompanying tentacles grew where they were severed, and from the pools of blood soaking the earth an endless stream of demons were spawned, surrounding Saber in layers.

The invisible sword and endless stream of monsters were in a deadlock; Caster held the reins in this battle. Not aiming for speedy victory, the magus advanced inch by inch, manoeuvering

sufficient forces to check Saber, keeping the battle in a deadlock. It was a plan for a drawn-out battle; he would tire Saber out, exhaust her, and then finish her off with one blow. Saber was completely stuck in Caster's trap. Perhaps the situation would have been different if Saber were not wounded; she would have held off this feeble swarm with ease. But her left hand was still troubled by that curse. Saber's expression, visible through the crystal ball, belied her anxiety at being unable to fight as she wished.

"Are there still no signs of the other Masters entering the forest?" Kiritsugu asked behind Irisviel, ignoring Saber's difficult situation. This earned him Irisviel's disappointment, which he too seemed not to notice; he just prepared his weapons in silence, attaching various grenades and small machine guns to the suspender beneath his jacket. It hardly looked like the preparation of a magus about to enter battle. Glancing down, Irisviel saw that the holster at Kiritsugu's waist held the magecraft-enhanced single-loader, carried only at crucial moments, and she understood the extent of her husband's preparation.

"Maiya, escape the castle with Iri. Go in the opposite direction Saber took."

Maiya nodded without doubt at the command, but Irisviel could not conceal her heart's uncertainty.

"Can't I . . . stay here?"

"Saber is fighting a distance from here, which means this castle is no longer safe; others would be thinking the same thing as I. This place is very dangerous now."

The other Masters might really play the situation to their advantage and attack Saber's Master while the Servant was away.

The best time to kill a Master was when Master and Servant were acting while separate. Between a Master under the protection of his Servant, and a magus guarding his headquarters by himself, the latter was definitely easier to defeat. Any magus who came to this conclusion would certainly attack Irisviel—who was still in the castle—once he knew that Saber was fighting alone.

She had finally met up with Kiritsugu, but they were about to be separated again. This unsettled Irisviel, further aggravated by her sensing of the pain and conflict Kiritsugu hid in his heart. But she would only a burden at Kiritsugu's side; this meeting with Kiritsugu in the castle was already a breach of the rules they had agreed on earlier.

Cooling her worries, Irisviel finally felt the root of her anxiety. It was not her imminent separation from Kiritsugu, but the prospect of travelling with Maiya. Though Kiritsugu's intent was to have Maiya protect Irisviel, she could not rid herself of this detest toward Maiya. Still, she would not let her feelings obstruct his battle plans.

"I understand." In the short time she took to nod an acknowledgement—"?!" A new prickling pain surfaced on Irisviel's Magic Circuits—more information from the bounded field of the forest.

"What's wrong, Iri?"

"Kiritsugu, it is as you feared. A new enemy has entered the forest."

– 130:48:29

Saber grasped the enemy's intentions after defeating three monsters. She did not know the reason for it yet. However, the overly fragile tentacle monsters and Caster's unnatural degree of confidence registered in her instincts. After ten monsters, Saber finally confirmed the reason for her unsettledness. The number of enemies did not decrease. The more she defeated, the more emerged. Caster's summoning magecraft called for continual reinforcements from other worlds.

Even then, it mattered not to her; Saber silently steeled herself. No matter how large the crowd of enemies swells to, she had only to defeat them twice as quickly. Driven by her boiling morale, Saber's sword sped up in the blink of an eye. Thirty. The enemies' numbers did not falter, and a flash of anxiety passed in Saber's heart. Fifty. Saber understood that it was pointless to count anymore. The children's flesh and blood were not the only breeding ground for the demonic monsters. Through her peripheral vision, Saber realized that new demonic monsters were being born from the corpses of the defeated monsters. No wonder they did not decrease. The defeated demonic monsters were being resurrected almost indefinitely.

This was a competition involving sheer prana volume. Saber immediately slowed her sword when she realized this was going to be a long battle. She would not last if she were to swing her sword without holding back; minimum strength would have to be used. Caster's prana should not be without limit. Repeatedly

summoning and resurrecting familiars would eventually exhaust his prana. The question was whether Saber would be able to last that long.

Saber once again worried about her unuseable left hand. She had to use prana bursts to compensate for her lack in strength when wielding the sword with only her right hand. In this situation, any extra use of prana was a burden heavier than anything else. If she could hold the hilt of this sword with both hands, she could completely vaporize this filthy trash with just one blow of Excaliber • the Sword of Promised Victory. She did not let this remorse get to her. Although the defeated monsters numbered over a hundred, Caster still wore an easy smile while admiring Saber's struggling battle. Saber glanced at Caster, who yielded no sign of exhaustion—to mild shock on her part—and once again noticed the extraordinarily dense amount of prana released by the magecraft tome in his hands.

"Perhaps . . ."

A most pessimistic guess, but probably correct. Summoning magecraft had brought these countless demonic monsters, resurrected them, and urged them on their relentless rush toward Saber's sword. The spell was being recited by that tome. It was no mere pile of paper holding an index of spells. That tome was, in all probability, a prana furnace of incredible capacity, a 'monster' that could use magecraft by its own power. Caster was not chanting the spells from the tome's pages, but freely manipulating that tome which served as a prana source.

Prelati's Spellbook • The Text of the Spiralled Sunken Citadel —a terrifying Noble Phantasm indeed. Had Irisviel been Saber's

proper Master, she would have seen through his abilities the first time they met, recognized the opponent for the dangerous Servant he was, and noted his ability to modify the power of his Noble Phantasm. Had she known this, Saber would not have fallen so easily into his trap, and locked herself into a long battle with Caster, even if she earned scorn for such cowardly actions; she might have acted more prudently.

No. Regret is a display of weakness, Saber yelled to herself. A knight who fought for honor and glory could not be allowed to retreat before evils such as Caster. She would be giving up on the greatest strength and weapon at her disposal—the heart of justice that believed in her holy sword.

"This brings back memories, Jeanne. It is just like it was back then." Caster, wearing a trance-like expression like one gazing at a holy painting, watched Saber's increasingly miserable battle.

"Even in a dangerous situation, overwhelmed by enemies, you never feared, did not succumb, and your gaze never doubted your own victory. You are indeed the same. That noble vigor, that dignified soul, is undoubtedly evidence of the holy maid Jeanne d'Arc. It is so obvious . . ."

Full of nonsense as always! But Saber subdued the anger filling her heart, and concentrated on killing the sundry weaklings before her. A word-by-word rebuke would only encourage him.

"Why? Why have you still not awakened to the truth? Do you still believe in God's protection? Do you think miracles would arrive to save you in such a desperate situation? How lamentable! Did you forget the battle of Compiègne? Forget God's trap that pushed you down from the zenith of glory to infernal destruction?

Do you still consent to remain God's puppet even after so much humiliation?"

If only she could block that blabbering mouth! She dearly wished to inform him, with the full force of justice, of the judgment which would be passed on him for the sin he had committed—robbing the lives of children to feed his boring vain hopes—but even as the thought formed, her sword could not touch him at all. Saber was stopped by the wall of demonic monsters that overwhelmed her ten-fold, twenty-fold . . . She was still too far from Caster.

Finding a slight gap, Saber leapt in—but a tentacle behind her wrapped itself around her head. Reflexively, she stretched out a hand to grab it before it wrapped around her. Her left hand, its thumb completely out of her control, slipped powerlessly across the skin of the tentacle.

"Uuuu . . ."

As soon as Saber stopped, her field of view was entirely covered by the wall of tentacles. She could only use a prana burst to blow them apart. But with this many . . .

In the blink of an eye, golden red lightning flashed past and pushed the alien horde back. Before Saber, still gasping after her bonds were loosened, a tall figure dressed in teal armor came into sight.

"How unsightly, Saber! If that's as awe-inspiring as your swordplay gets, the title of the King of Knights would cry for help."

This handsome man, beautiful almost to a fault, flashed a stunning smile at Saber, standing dumbstruck aside. Only her

magic resistance endured her this alluring gaze. The burning brilliance of his two spears formed a perfect contrast with Diarmuid ua Duibhne's incomparably sweet and refreshing smile.

"Lancer, why . . .?"

But Caster's surprise was much greater than Saber's.

"Who are you?! Who gave you permission to disturb me!"

"That's what I was going to say, heretic devil." Lancer stared coldly at the provoked Caster, and with his left pointed the short spear's tip.

"Blame your insolence; Saber's head is destined to be the medal hung beneath my spear. Your theft of my fruit of victory is an impudent and despicable thing on the battlefield."

"Nonsense! Nonsense nonsense nonsense—!!" Caster clawed his head, bulged out his eyes, and made weird sounds in his throat.

"My prayers! My Holy Grail! They were all to let that woman reawaken! She is mine . . . every piece of flesh, every drop of blood, and even that soul are all mine!!"

Lancer was not overwhelmed at all. He shrugged his shoulders and took a deep sigh.

"Are you listening? I'm the one who wounded Saber's left hand. Only I have the right to exploit her single-handed disadvantage."

Slowly, Lancer lifted up the tips of the twin spears by his sides, and took up his unique double-spear stance. Standing in front of Saber, he seemed to be shielding the King of Knights behind his back.

"Oi, Caster, I'm not meddling in your love affair. If you are set on making Saber succumb to you and taking her away, you are free to do so . . . Only—" A burning and yet desolate resolution filled the handsome soldier's eyes as he proclaimed. "Forget you not Diarmuid! I will not permit the defeat of the single-handed Saber! If you will not back down, then these my spears will be Saber's left hand."

Now that she thought about it, this is the second time that Saber looked at the spearman's back in this fashion. Last night, as she faced Berserker's furious attacks, Lancer also intervened in this way. Is all this just to finish all of his business with her, who once crossed swords with him?

"Lancer, you . . ."

"Do not mistake my intentions, Saber." Lancer's sharp glance stopped Saber's words. "My Master's commands for me today concerned only Caster's defeat. There were no orders concerning you. For that reason, I deduced the best course of action would be fighting together. What think you?"

His words were insufficient explanation; such bold declarations were unnecessary. He could have chosen the moment when Caster was completely engrossed while dealing with Saber, and looped around behind Caster to launch a surprise attack instead. But Saber questioned him not, and merely nodded at Lancer, a hint of a smile playing on the corners of his mouth, taking up position at his right. Her left now secured, Saber held her sword and faced her right. At this moment, she had a most trustworthy left arm.

"To be clear—Lancer, my left hand alone would have defeated a hundred of these little imps."

"Huh—that'd be easy. You could just be left-handed for today."

Trading jests, the two Heroic Spirits sprang toward the gathered demonic monsters. The holy sword and two demonic spears cleaved through the mass of tentacles that stretched toward them from all directions.

"Unforgivable . . .! Enough with your boasts, puny man!"

The magecraft tome in Caster's hand throbbed curiously, as if reinforcing his roar; pages flipped by themselves in succession. The number of demonic monsters suddenly doubled. The mass of tentacles, raised as though to blot out the forest, surged toward Saber and Lancer. The fiercer, more tragic second act of the battle began.

– 130:45:08

Through sheer luck, Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald caught Caster's figure in his sight in Fuyuki. Although dumbfounded to discover the figure, clad in an inky black cloak—obviously from the wrong era—strolling casually along the suburban streets at dusk, Kayneth began his chase. Shortly after, he witnessed Caster stopping a passing small truck, forcing hypnotic suggestions on the driver, and sitting in it with the children, like a group on a kindergarten trip.

A battle between Servants could only be conducted away from public eye. Coincidentally, the truck carrying Caster was driving toward the remote mountains, far from the city. Kayneth snickered—this suited his purpose perfectly—but began to hesitate when he realised its destination was the Einsbern forest. He had heard of the Einsbern territory near Fuyuki when he conducted prior investigations. It was magi territory, and would therefore have a bounded field; not an advantageous location for others to battle. In spite of this, whatever Caster's reason for travelling here, his intention of challenging the Einsbern power was obvious. There might be something to gain out of this battle. Kayneth, making up his mind, stepped into the forest with Lancer.

Per his expectations, Caster began fighting Saber, who materialized to counter his assault. From his befuddled speech and behaviour, it was clear that Caster, already roaming, was acting alone, but Saber's Master failed to appear. The Master, probably deducing that he could protect himself in his territory without his

Servant alongside, decided to observe the battle in his headquarters away from the frontline.

With this, Kayneth prepared his own strategies. He ordered Lancer to assault Caster. For Kayneth, who had already used up one Command Seal, the reward the supervisor offered for defeating Caster was something he would do anything to obtain. However, if he defeated Caster here, he would be on the same side as Saber; the Einsbern Master would also be given an extra Command Seal—a result Kayneth hoped to avoid. Therefore, Kayneth decided to leave Caster to Lancer, and secretly enter the Einsbern castle alone. To claim Caster's head as his own, he only had to get rid of Saber's Master at the same time.

Although it was a bold challenge, Kayneth had unshakable confidence in himself. Whatever the Einsbern defenses, he would bet the title of Lord El-Melloi on his ability to break it apart. Such courage would be needed to amend the defects Sola reprimanded him for last night. For Kayneth, the most pressing problem for him right now was to have his fiancée take back her insults. Kayneth moved toward the depth of the forest as the seething vigor boiled inside him. Although illusionary magecraft had been cast upon the forest in the bounded field, Kayneth's outstanding knowledge and instincts allowed him to make precise deductions, and he easily found the location of the bounded field's central axis. His mighty title of Greatest Genius of Spirit Invocation was not given in vain. If this was the level of magecraft the Einsberns boasted, then it was clear just how well the castle was defended.

Kayneth still felt enough ease to snicker. Although many of the magecraft artefacts he brought from England were lost when

the hotel collapsed, his strongest trump card, his Mystic Code, had always been by his side. He did not feel his battle strength was ad any disadvantage. The trees hindering his sight suddenly disappeared, and the antique stone castle appeared in his sight. So this is it; no less from these prestigious northern magi. Even a relocated castle was a building of abnormal size. But Kayneth, son of the prestigious house of Archibald, only snorted. The castle's majesty might overwhelm others, but it earned no such sentiment from him.

. . . Not bad. Once Einsbern was dealt with, it would not be a bad idea to take this castle as his new headquarters . . . After losing the Hyatt hotel suite, he had obtained an abandoned factory on the city outskirts as his temporary base, and hid Sola there. Predictably, his fiancée's mood could not be worse; even his own pride would not tolerate such an environment. If this was his plan, he would have to keep building damage to a minimum.

Kayneth laughed presumptuously and placed the large porcelain vase he carried under his arm on the ground. As it left his hand, the vase sank deeply into the earth. This vase, under a weight reduction spell to make it easier to carry, actually weighed almost a hundred and forty kilograms.

"Fervor, mei sanguis.[2]"

Once he chanted the activating spell, something oozed out from the mouth of the vase. The mirror-like metal sheen of the liquid made it readily identifable as mercury. Flowing from the vase like a disciplined primeval creature, the mass of shivering mercury—roughly ten kilograms or so—formed a ball. Among

2 Let my flowing blood seethe.

the many in his possession, this was one of the Mystic Codes Lord El-Melloi took much pride in: Volumen Hydragyrum • Moon Spirit Cerebrospinal Fluid.

"Automatoportum defensio: Automatoportum quaerere: Dilectus incursio.[3]"

Obeying Kayneth's low chanting, the surface of the mass of mercury vibrated and rustled as if in answer, following his feet on the ground to approach the gates of the castle. Kayneth, possessing the attributes of water and wind—a feat rare even among magi—excelled in the art of manipulating flow, which was shared between these two attributes. He thus created this unique Mystic Code, using mercury filled with magecraft as his weapon, controlling it at will. The shapeless mercury could also be sculpted into any shape—

"Scalp!"

As Kayneth yelled, a part of the mercury ball suddenly became a long and thin ribbon, extending upwards. The mercury ribbon savagely thrashed the door like a whip. Right before impact, the mercury whip suddenly compressed itself into a thin edge only a few millimeters thick, becoming a razor sharp mercury blade. Attacked by this mercury blade edge, the heavyset bolt was cut in half smoothly, like a piece of tofu. The great gates collapsed inwards with a heavy groan.

Mercury is a heavy liquid at room temperature; moving rapidly under high pressure, it possessed great kinetic energy. Moreover, mercury could change its form, creating functional weapons like whips, spears, and blades. Its sharpness could even

3 Automated defense: Automated Search: Attack on Command.

overwhelm laser rays and rival pressurized water jet cutters. He carried about him the confidence of assured victory, for even the most solid defense stood no chance before Lord El-Melloi's Volumen Hydragyrum. Titanium alloys, or diamonds—nothing was unbreakable.

Kayneth walked leisurely toward the great hall of the castle after finishing off the obstacle. The crystal chandelier in the hall emanated brilliant light, and the marble floor, polished to an extreme, had not a single flaw. Even the air felt extraordinarily still, save for Kayneth's presence—of course, not a single person came out to greet him.

"The ninth head of the Archibald house, Kayneth El-Melloi, requests an audience!"

Kayneth, with an air of command, proclaimed loudly in the deserted hall.

"Magus of Einsbern! For the Holy Grail you seek, bet your life and pride, and come out to meet me!"

Despite Kayneth's taunting declaration, no one responded, as though unwilling to duel. Kayneth sighed, and walked toward the center of the hall with heavy steps, like one made a fool. As he reached the center of the hall, the four flower vases placed at the four corners suddenly exploded with an enormous roar. However, it was not porcelain fragments that flew out from the explosion, but countless metal beads, springing toward Kayneth like bullets.

This machinery was constructed without magecraft; Kayneth did not sense any hint of magecraft activation. It must be machinery that Kiritsugu had set up in the vases. It was an anti-personnel mine called a Claymore, a cruel pre-set bomb. As each

mine explodes, it releases about seven hundred steel balls simultaneously, each only one or two millimeters in diameter. These steel balls fanned outward radially at high speed, a terrifying weapon made to obliterate infantry units with one strike. One would not have time to escape the explosion. The victim would be peppered like a sieve—of course, provided he was not a magus.

In the split second before 2,800 steel balls reached Kayneth, the spot he was standing on was enveloped in a silver semi-circle. The mass of mercury lying recumbent beside his feet suddenly changed form. Although the tight, thin mercury membrane wrapped around Kayneth was barely a millimeter thick, its surface tension could match the strength of steel when supported with prana. Not a single bead dispersed by the Claymore mines had hit Kayneth. The storm of beads, reflected by the mercury barrier, hammered the setups in the hall into smithereens.

This was Volumen Hydragyrum's "automated defense" mode. This pre-set magecraft automatically responded when Kayneth was threatened, forming a powerful protective membrane in a split second. This kind of reaction speed could defend him even from bullets. It was also this defense system Volumen Hydragyrum created that protected Kayneth and Sola when the Hyatt hotel collapsed. The malleable mercury was a perfect weapon that combined attack and defense, serving Kayneth as both sword and shield.

"... Hm."

Kayneth, witnessing the tragic scene around him once the membrane barrier was removed, snorted with derision at the

baseness of the machination. Even Kayneth, possessing scant knowledge of military equipment, understood he had been assaulted not by magecraft, but by ordinary weapons filled with gunpowder. Kayneth's mind finally uncovered some truth concerning the unpleasant experience last night. No further analysis was needed; among the other six Masters, the only one who sought most to destroy him was Saber's Master, the Einsberns. Still, how could the Einsbern magus, hailing from a high-born house of eminent prestige, stoop to such base methods? Kayneth, who took great pride in his prestigious heritage, found this impossible to believe. But this was the truth that now confronted him. The one who destroyed Kayneth's workshop with explosives so despicably last night was hiding in this castle at the very moment.

"... Fallen so low, Einsbern?" Kayneth mumbled, more lamentation than anger in his tone. Saber's Master probably was not the one employing such despicable methods; it must have been some lowly hired goon. Even so, it was a very contemptible thing to do. Inviting unrelated combatants to this holy battlefield was utterly unforgivable.

—Fine. This will not be a duel, but my personal crusade against you. Rousing his killing intent, Kayneth walked deeper into the enemy's defences.

Through the CCD cameras concealed in the main hall, Kiritsugu meticulously observed the power of Volumen Hydragyrum, Lord El-Melloi's pride. Using spells to manipulate mercury for automatic protection—although he had heard of this before, he never thought the real thing would have such powerful

abilities. Even the shockwave of the Claymore mines could not beat its speedy defense; he could not rely on firearms to attain victory. Although annoyed, Kiritsugu admitted that this magus possessed first-rate skills. He should have guessed it when his machinations at the Hyatt did not succeed. Kiritsugu would have to confront this opponent as a magus.

Right now, in his search for the enemy in hiding, Kayneth must be inspectinging each room on the first floor one by one. Kiritsugu was located at the innermost part of the second floor. If he acted immediately, there should be enough time to pick a stage to his advantage. Kiritsugu analyzed the castle floor plan in his head as he walked out of his room and toward the door—his footsteps suddenly stopped.

A drop of mercury, like a thread of cobweb, hung in the door's keyhole. Although only a tiny bit of mercury, Kiritsugu could still see it drooping toward the ground, leaving a silver trail on the door's surface. Right when he spotted it, the drop of mercury suddenly stopped moving. Retracing its tracks, it retreated back through the keyhole like a live creature, and disappeared.

"... So that's what it is; an automated search."

Following his bitter remark, a ray of silver light sprang up from below the salon's carpet. In the blink of an eye, a circle was cleanly cut through the floor at the center of the room, which fell to the ground below. A silver tentacle leapt up from that circular hole. Rising before Kiritsugu, Volumen Hydragyrum took the form of a metallic jellyfish. Endless tentacles grabbed the edge of the opening on the floor, while the base, opening in the middle

like an umbrella, expanded into a flat, bowl-like platform. The smiling one on the platform was Lord El-Melloi himself.

"I finally found you, little mouse . . ."

Before the triumphant Kayneth ordered an attack, Kiritsugu had already drawn the Calico submachine gun from his waist holster and opened fire. Reacting immediately, Volumen Hydragyrum formed a protective membrane in front of Kayneth and blocked the ferocious 9mm bullet hail. It took only a few seconds to empty fifty bullets—precious seconds that gave Kiritsugu ample time to chant his spell.

"Time Alter: Double Accel!" The prana inside Kiritsugu began to dart at light speed.

"Scalp!" Kayneth gave the proclamation of death the moment Kiritsugu's firing ceased. The two mercury whips that leapt up flew toward the prey in a pincer formation, attacking from the flanks.

"Hm?!"

It was Kayneth who exclaimed in surprise. Just as the two silver whips were about to hit, Kiritsugu dodged the attack with unbelievable speed and quickly leapt below Volumen Hydragyrum, on which Kayneth was standing, through the hole in the ground cleaved out by the mercury blade. This took place with such rapidity that human eyes could not see his movements clearly. This was clearly a physical feat no ordinary human could perform. Though Kayneth felt a little careless, this strange sight failed to surprise him. After all, this was a battle between magi that ignored ordinary rules; a little pest with extraordinary abilities was hardly an oddity.

"Oh? You also know a little bit about magecraft?"

A small smile passed Kayneth's face, but a killing intent was already in heart. Ordinary pest or otherwise, even if he had some schooling in magecraft, he was a lowly man who stooped to dirty means. Such actions, which brought dishonour to magi, could not be tolerated.

"Scum . . . I'll let you know the taste of death."

Kayneth flipped the tail of his coat and leapt down to the first floor. Volumen Hydragyrum liquesced and slowly descended as well.

"Ire: Sanctio![4]"

The mercury's thin tentacles scattered with these orders, once again scanning the entire first floor, immediately confirming the target's location. Following the tracks of the tracing mercury, a sliver of a bloodthirsty smile gleaned on Kayneth's lips.

Kiritsugu, traversing the corridors, felt like his entire body was being devoured by the after-effects of his magecraft. The skill he used to dodge Kayneth's Mystic Code just then was not a basic physical enchantment. It was advanced magecraft with a greater range of utility—and, of course, with far stronger side effects.

The ability to separate the passage of time inside a designated space from the flow of time in the outside world—in some ways, Time Manipulation could be regarded as a type of Reality Marble. Although classified as greater magecraft, it was definitely not unreplicatable magic. Compared to Time Modification, which could reverse cause and effect, changing the past, this was merely

4 Search and Destroy.

magecraft of Time Adjustment which could stagnate time passed and accelerate time to come; it was not magecraft of extraordinary difficulty. The only consideration was the size of the bounded field and the scope of time that needed manipulation.

Kiritsugu's root, the Emiya family, had spent generations researching and seeking the magecraft of time control. The magic crests on Kiritsugu's back inherited the fruits of research from generations of men. But the prana cost and the preparation rituals required to activate this kind of magecraft rivalled that of greater magecrafts; its preparation and use were thus necessarily strategic. For Kiritsugu, who only crafted strategies to survive on the battlefield, it was originally a rather useless inheritance. However, to use the time control ability he had inherited optimally, Kiritsugu created a flexible way of utilizing this magecraft on a very small scale.

A method that limited the bounded field's scope within the practitioner's body made it easier to establish a Reality Marble. Although it was impossible to completely isolate the flesh from the outside world, it could minimize the effect of the outside world on the body. Within this minimal bounded field, he could manipulate time, a few seconds at a time. This was the magecraft that Emiya Kiritsugu created—Innate Time Control.

In the fight with Kayneth just then, Kiritsugu accelerated his blood flow, haemoglobin metabolism, and muscle movement all at the same time. The rest was simply his quick reaction to the attack; the paths of the mercury whips were easily predicted and avoided. Kiritsugu was capable of accomplishing physical feats impossible for ordinary humans after he accelerated time inside

his body. Its biggest drawback was the huge burden it placed on the body.

The craft of time modification inevitably created discrepancies between the time within and without the bounded field. These discrepancies would immediately be corrected by natural forces when the bounded field is removed, in accordance with natural laws, wherever they occurred. Now, in Kiritsugu's bounded field —his physical body—adjustments were taking place in his flesh to synchronise it with the ordinary flow of time. Death was an ever-present danger that accompanied the use of magecraft, and Innate Time Control was Kiritsugu's riskiest technique. He had just walked the tightrope of his lifeline above the canyon of Death.

Compared to Kayneth's unrestricted magecraft, Kiritsugu's ability lacked power. But this did not eliminate his chances of victory now. Kayneth may have not realized it, but his best chance at killing Kiritsugu—the strike just then—had been wasted. That was his biggest mistake. Kayneth had exposed the true form of his Mystic Code, and also given Kiritsugu a chance to analyze it. After that, it was hunting time for the Magus Killer.

Kiritsugu exchanged the helical magazine on the Calico for a new one as he ran. The bullet in the Contender was switched with a normal one; it was still too early to use the final killing move. He had to provoke Kayneth further before he could kill the enemy with one strike. Lord El-Melloi's mercury Mystic Code boasted both attack and defense, and also possessed the ability to search out enemies. However, Kiritsugu had already spotted the flaw in this tri-advantaged magecraft.

First, its ability to search for enemies—

Kiritsugu suddenly stopped as he turned a corner, and hid in the shadow of a pillar. The mercury approached him not only from behind, but spread silently over the entire corridor, creeping ever closer, and closer. In all likelihood, the mercury tentacles were forming a giant web and sealing off all his exits. To use liquid metal as a sensory tool—how would the perceived information be transmitted back? There were no specialized senses such as sight, smell, taste; this explained Kayneth's fluent control of it. That eliminated those choices. The most probable would be through touch. But when Kiritsugu was discovered on the second floor, his location had been pinpointed without any contact with the mercury. However, if the mercury was sensitive enough, it would be able to make judgment based on vibrations in the air. It should also be able to sense differences in air temperature and seek out heat sources. Kiritsugu chuckled as he stared at the mercury web approaching from all directions. That thing had no eyes. If he contorted his heart beat, breathing and body temperature, he could erase its perception of his existence.

"Time Alter: Triple Stagnate."

Following the chanting of the spell, Kiritsugu's field of view suddenly brightened incredibly. The outer world had not changed; it was only his delusion. Though Kiritsugu's optic nerves still registered the same visions, his cornea was receiving thrice the amount of light a person's eyes would normally take in.

This time control was the opposite of his accelerated physical speed earlier. Kiritsugu slowed his biological processes to a third of their normal rate. His breathing retarded, and his heart beat stagnated until he could barely feel it himself. His metabolism

slowed greatly, causing his body temperature to drop quickly, cooling until it was not much different from air temperature.

The mercury flew abnormally quickly and anxiously in front of Kiritsugu, who was still as a statue. As he expected, the mercury could not detect him. Kiritsugu's shallow breathing and slow heart beat were muddled by natural background noise. The mercury could no longer sense the physiological processes of Kiritsugu's body using normal human standards. Detecting no signs of the enemy, the searching mercury web speedily retreated, retracing its steps. The sound of footsteps on the marble floor followed. Thinking no one present, Kayneth walked on without precaution . . .

"Release Alter!"

His bright sight and sharp hearing returned to normal in the blink of an eye. Kiritsugu's heart began to beat extremely quickly; every blood vessel in his body seemed at bursting point. His hurting body was adjusting to blood flow up to three times its original speed; it must be bruising in a few places from internal bleeding due to burst capillaries. But before these adjustments completed themselves, Kiritsugu had already leapt from behind the pillar. Kayneth, arriving at the corridor, reacted, but Kiritsugu was merely fifteen meters away. He immediately opened fire on the wide-eyed magus with the Calico in his left hand. Despite Kayneth's shock, Volumen Hydragyrum deployed its abilities accurately and loyally as ever. The protective membrane opened up in the blink of an eye and blocked the storm of 9mm bullets—a replay of the scene before.

". . . Idiot. Such boring tricks!"

Although at a loss from the ambush, Kayneth, hidden within the protective membrane, could not help but laugh at this discovery of the attack's innocuity. Little did he realize that the opponent he was mocking had already figured out the weakness in his automated defense. Before the Calico stopped firing, Kiritsugu's unencumbered right hand pulled the Contender out and fired a shot at center of the expanded, semi-circular mercury membrane. Volumen Hydragyrum had adopted the best physical configuration to defend against the Calico, but the initial velocity of the .30—06 Springfield was two-and-a-half times higher than the 9MM bullets, and its destructive power seven times greater.

Kiritsugu had seen through Volumen Hydragyrum's speed, which arose from its pressure. Hydraulic pressure enabled a blob of mercury to spread into a membrane faster than a speeding bullet, but the recovery could not take place as quickly. That was the limit of hydrodynamics. If another sudden massive force was pitted against it, the mercury would not react quickly to form a powerful defense.

A big hole was punched right through the mirror-smooth surface of the mercury membrane. Judging from Kayneth's wails inside, the Springfield bullet had found its target. It was a lucky hit; his aim was obstructed, and a fatal hit would be too much to ask from a blind shot. Kayneth's wails quickly turned into angry curses, then—

"Scalp!"

Obeying the bloodthirsty roar, the mercury unleashed a deadly move. Kiritsugu faced the oncoming silver whips with ease. He did not even need to activate Innate Time Control this time; there

were more than ten meters between him and Kayneth now. Such a distance was more than enough. Kiritsugu pulled back just a bit. One cannot hit what one cannot reach; the mercury blade only managed to cut the hem of his flowing coat.

Volumen Hydragyrum's characteristics could be grasped by just one study of its attacks. It was a fast attack, but comparatively simple. In the shape of a whip, mercury's extremely quick attacks were controlled by the base, but the tip had virtually no power; the blade's power came from centrifugal force. For someone as experienced in melee combat as Kiritsugu, such an attack path was easy to predict. This was another characteristic of pressure-controlled mercury: only portions of significant mass could exert full power, while the attack's strength weakens toward the tip. Kiritsugu had already analyzed this weakness when he realized that the mercury flagella that stretched far from the original mass to search for enemies were less agile than the cutting whips.

Kiritsugu was already running before the opponent could continue to attack. It would be ideal for the opponent to begin chasing him immediately, but the other man did not give chase, and stopped to treat the gun wound instead; the previous taunt was not enough. The blow that penetrated the protective membrane was the first, and would be the last. The Contender's power now realized—it was completely different from the Calico —Volumen Hydragyrum's defense would become firmer. In later attacks, it would be able to block the Springfield bullet as well. Kayneth would certainly use all his prana to strengthen the mercury's defense—not a good outcome.

Kiritsugu, enduring the pain enveloping his body, sprang the Contender's chamber and pulled out the empty cartridge as he ran. This time, he slipped in a magecraft bullet. Kayneth, enticed by the earlier normal bullet strike, would definitely utilize all the prana in his body to anticipate Kiritsugu's next strike. If things go according to plan, Kayneth would be digging himself the greatest of graves. The only thing left was to find a way to shove him in and bury him, with Kiritsugu's own hands.

The Magus Killer's hunt was about to reach its climax.

Act 7

– 130:44:57

This was the first time Irisviel had felt uneasy since she arrived at Fuyuki. She realized once again the importance of Saber, who was constantly at her side. The aura of quiet confidence and tolerance from her lithe frame reassured Irisviel greatly. Not that Hisau Maiya, here in Saber's place, was a untrustworthy bodyguard; Kiritsugu also held Maiya's abilities in high regard, and she was not suspicious.

Wherefore this strange anxiousness?

Beating a strategic retreat from the castle, the two travelled through the forest of the bounded field without a word. Maiya was not the sort to enjoy banter, but her complete silence seemed unnaturally heavy to Irisviel. Would Maiya answer if spoken to? It would not hurt to try. they were in a safe zone, isolated from battle, not in a precarious situation requiring stealth and silence. She would gather courage and ask—no, she had no words for her tongue—Irisviel once again checked herself. Her questions were piled high as mountains; meetings with Kiritsugu, memories of

time spent with him, Kiritsugu's integrity in Maiya's eyes, ... She wanted answers to all those questions, but felt hesitation at the prospect of asking.

Hisau Maiya *knew* the Kiritsugu she did not know. If Maiya's answers could shatter her heart's portrait of her husband—

No, such a thing was impossible. But there was no evidence to deny it in such a way. To Irisviel, the short span of nine years which began with their initial meeting was all of Kiritsugu. The silence continued, and her mind circled irritably. The atmosphere was clearly awkward, but Maiya kept moving, seemingly ignorant.

"—Clearly, I am inept to handle her—" As she hung her head and sighed deeply, a warning flashed in Irisviel's head.

"—?!" Surprised, Maiya looked at Irisviel, whose whole body suddenly stiffened.

"What's the matter, Madam?"

". . . Another new intruder, slightly ahead. We'll meet if we continue onward."

It was to be expected. Maiya nodded calmly.

"Then we shall slowly loop round. It will be safe to detour toward the north."

Irisviel, concentrating in an effort to scry on the invader with her magecraft of clairvoyance, did not respond immediately. Clad in pitch-black vestments, the tall figure was intimidating. His short hair and serious demeanor appeared exactly like the photographs in Kiritsugu's research resources.

". . . It's Kirei Kotomine."

The change in Maiya's expression surprised Irisviel more than the curious statement did. Icy and expressionless, Maiya was a woman of indecipherable emotion. She had supposed Maiya's heart to be truly cold and cruel to her core. This was the first time she had seen Maiya's expression—anxiety crossed with fury. It was definitely not fear … a sense of apprehension. She was probably not worried by Kirei, but by his appearance in such a situation. Irisviel now understood. Though her reasoning was slightly crude, Irisiviel finally understood the mind of Hisau Maiya.

"Maiya, your orders from Kiritsugu were to ensure my safety, were they not?"

"Correct, but—"

"But what? You were thinking 'this is the one man I cannot allow to obstruct Kiritsugu,' right?"

Smiling slyly, Irisviel pointed out her thoughts. Maiya was temporarily rendered speechless.

"Madam, you …"

"I am of the same mind."

Kirei Kotomine, probably Kiritsugu's greatest threat. Maiya's response on hearing his name made it self-evident. Though Irisviel was a homunculus, she had fallen in love, fulfilled that sentiment, and even became a mother. She had that sixth sense, natural to humans but foreign to homunculi—a woman's intuition.

"We two shall stop Kirei here. What do you say, Maiya?

Hesitating for only a moment, Maiya nodded her head with a curious expression on her face.

"My deepest apologies. Please prepare yourself, Madam."

"Not a problem. Don't worry about me. Carry out your task—not Kiritsugu's orders, but what you deem necessary."

"Yes."

Perhaps she had already suspected. That was why she was afraid to confirm it. Irisviel understood; she had been avoiding Maiya, not from fear of her, but from unwillingness to know her heart. She was afraid of the truth—that she was not the only woman who cared about Emiya Kiritsugu. Irisviel could not help but laugh in exultation which came with anticipation of the deathmatch. Maiya, pulling out her Calico submachine gun, gave her a glance of surprise.

"What's the matter?"

"The human heart is truly an amazing thing."

Here she was, gambling her life for Kiritsugu—and there was undeniably another woman with such determination. This truth, shocking to her earlier self, now put her at great ease.

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Kirei Kotomine did not find it difficult to assess Irisviel's party and their plan of action. The other Masters had Caster in their sights, while Caster had his eyes set on Saber. There was no need for specifics. The best strategy was to make complete preparations for an attack in the home base and wait for the opponents to arrive. There was no need for a search. The Einsbern Forest, in this Fuyuki wilderness, should not be unused at this time. Emiya Kiritsugu should be still there.

Of course, Kirei never planned to enter battle himself. There was a high chance the eastern part of the forest would become a major battleground. It would make sense for their enemies from Fuyuki to attack from that direction. Kirei hung around the western edge, waiting for others to join the battle. He hedged his bets on the chance that if a battle was started on the eastern side as he predicted, he could launch a surprise attack on the castle from its opposite direction.

He released Assassin in spirit form into the forest to scout. Possessing Presence Concealment, Assassin was able to enter the bounded field without being detected. Though they could not go near the castle, they were still able to observe the battle around the outer rim of the forest. As predicted, the battle between Caster and Saber had begun on the eastern side of the forest. Furthermore, and luckily for Kirei, Einsbern engaged only the Servant, while the Master remained hidden behind closed doors. Assassin's report revealed an excellent opportunity for Kirei. If Kiritsugu was hired by Einsbern to be a hunting dog, then he was likely guarding the Master, who was defenceless and far from her Servant. This was an excellent chance for Kirei to force them into a dead end.

Although Assassin immediately alerted him to the fact that Lord El-Melloi was also advancing toward the castle, Kirei did not hesitate. Instead, he felt anxious. If Kiritsugu died by Kayneth's hand, it would be impossible for Kirei to complete his purpose. Thus, he prepared for the worst case scenario—being forced to confront Kayneth—and advanced quickly through the forest.

Depending on the situation, there was also a possibility of Einsbern abandoning the castle to escape. They will obviously retrograde away from the eastern battlefield, where the Servants were currently battling. In that case, there was a good chance they would encounter Kirei. To be safe, Kirei began his battle preparations early; he was able to reacted dextrously to the unexpected murderous intent. he ducked in half a breath, dodging a hailstorm of bullets which howled above his head like thunder. Even many-battled veterans might sometimes lose morale and judgment when surprised by a machine gun, but not the Executioners of the Holy Church. Kirei did not even break a sweat as he analyzed the situation calmly.

There was only one opponent. From the gunfire report, the weapon was a submachine gun with caliber under 9mm. Because the handgun bullets lacked the power to penetrate tree trunks, its was much less of a threat than the sniper rifle in the forest. Inferring the opponent's position from the muzzle flash, Kirei flung two Black Keys that way, and to his surprise was met with the solid sound of trunks pierced by blades.

"... Mm?"

The murderous attacker returned to raid him, flanking the surprised Kirei. Once again, the report of gunfire—this time from the left. Though he dodged it at the last second, this volley was considerably more dangerous than the first. His earlier estimation of the enemy's numbers slightly slowed his reaction. The position of the second gunshot was completely different, too fast for movement. If there were two gunners, it would be possible to take out Kirei with a coordinated crossfire. Amid his confusion, he

sensed four more presences. Quickly arming two Black Keys in each hand—four Black Keys in total—Kirei positioned himself as new sensations flashed in his brain.

"That means . . . an illusion?"

Not impossible; he was deep in the forest's bounded field, and illusion was no impossibility here. If there was present a magus who could control illusions, his senses might be deluded. Is the unknown sniper really just one person? Is he also the one controlling the illusion? Or was someone else responsible for support. . .? Regardless, without a counter for the illusion, he could only play to his opponent's tempo. Kirei threw the four Black Keys in the direction of the new presences.

As anticipated, no sign of contact. Annoyed at the fruitless endeavor, Kirei exhibited his frustration. At the same time, the bullet scored a direct hit on his back.

The third gunshot had no scent by which he could sense; the first two were calculated feints to confuse him. If an illusory trap could manipulate fake hints of killing intent, it should be also possible to seal the true killing intent behind it. Without time to even howl in pain, the tall robed figure fell face first, his feet tangling. There was neither a twitch nor moans of pain. Has she pierced the spine and killed him instantly? Maiya, deducing success, stood up from her sniping location, approached him cautiously with the Calico still pointed.

"Maiya, no!" Irisviel, sensing the trap, shouted a warning. But it was too late.

Kirei, without rising from his prone position, threw a hidden Black Key with one swing of his arms. Tracing a low trajectory,

the Black Key ripped through Maiya's right calf, removing any opportunity action. Like a spring, Kirei leapt mechanically as he suddenly charged at Maiya. Fearlessly, Maiya squeezed the trigger, but Kirei protected only his head; he did not even bother to dodge. The monk's robes, even down to the sleeves, were made from thick Kevlar filaments, and covered seamlessly with the Church's special protection spells. 9mm caliber pistol rounds, even at extremely close distances, could not pierce it. Even then, the strikes from 250ft-lb bullets, firing at 10 rounds per second, struck Kirei's body like metal bats. But his well-honed musculature was like armor, protecting his organs and bones. Sensing the inefficacy of the bullets, Maiya immediately tossed the Calico and whipped out the combat knife at her thigh. Kevlar, though impenetrable to gunshots, was vulnerable to the swipe of a sharp blade. With her gun useless, her only option for survival was melee combat.

As the hailstorm of bullets ceased, Kirei wielded a pair of Black Keys in his hands and slashed at Maiya in cross-shaped sweeps. Maiya not slowed in the slightest by the gash in her right calf, deflected the continuous strikes of the Black Keys with her heavy dagger. Though the edge of the Black Key was far longer than the dagger, it was still a modified throwing weapon; in close combat, it lacked balance due to its extreme length. The versatile nature of Maiya's large dagger gave it overwhelming advantage here.

"Victory is still possible—!"

Maiya suddenly charged forward in a seemingly half-suicidal move. The Black Keys should be having a hard time defending against such an attack, and even if she was struck in retaliation,

the chances of being seriously wounded were low. With the Black Key in his right hand, Kirei blocked Maiya's dagger blade to blade. Perhaps relying on its length to counterattack, the crisscrossed blade's shadow lunged forward, its edge poised to strike. Maiya, foreseeing the attack, easily dodged. Moving her head only a little, the tip of the Black Key missed her as she barged into her opponent's embrace. Just when Maiya believed that victory was at hand, her gaze was drawn to Kirei's unusual movements.

In a crisscrossing counterattack, the crossed hands are—the right hand, where Kirei should be holding a Black Key, was empty! It was abandoned when Kirei lunged forward; he never had the intention of piercing her with it—

Like a clamp, the veiny fingers grabbed Maiya's right hand. Like a snake, the tall black robe twisted its body deftly, diving below Maiya's right arm, and in the next instant was supporting it with the back of his shoulder, as one would support a wounded person. This Black Key-wielding exorcist—she had been fooled by her first prejudiced impression of him. In despair, the helpless Maiya finally understood. This movement was Chinese kungfu, Ba Ji Quan. Kirei's side pressed in close to Maiya's waist. Simultaenously, he landed a blow on Maiya's heart with his left elbow, and a brilliant strike from his left foot took Maiya's supporting leg.

An amazing elbow upthrust sequence, one of the six big openings, completed as he grabbed the hand holding the dagger—a combo worthy of the soul of Ba Ji Quan, combining offense and defense. Maiya could not even move as she fell heavily to the ground. The impact was so great, the paralyzed Maiya thought

she had dislocated both her arms and legs. Subconsciously, she could only feel the sharp pain in her chest where it was struck by the elbow. She probably had broken two or three ribs. Though a single strike was capable of disabling Maiya, Kirei was satisfied. He now knew Kiritsugu's location, and had no need to grant her mercy. As he clenched his fist, ready to deliver the death blow, he saw something that made him doubt his eyes. The embarrassed Maiya was also surprised. Prior to this battle, she had an agreement with Irisviel, who was only to support her from a hidden location. But Irisviel, defenseless apart from her magic, gently floated from the bushes and stood facing Kirei.

"Madam, no!"

Maiya now tossed aside all fear and embarrassment. The threat to Irisviel eclipsed her own danger. If Kiritsugu were to lose his wife—as someone who swore to protect him, there could be no danger more despairing.

To Kirei, this situation was incomprehensible. He knew that Irisiviel and the Einsberns were not apt at using combat magic; their specialty was alchemy. In the previous three Heaven's Feels, they were helplessly defeated during the first rounds. Perhaps those northern magi were nearly useless in actual combat for this same reason. Kiritsugu's entry must have been the result of some reflection on this. Now, the female bodyguard lay fallen on the ground. Now, the most unlikely situation was happening—the Einzbern family's Master appeared alone before him. Kirei was fairly certain that this silver-haired maiden was Saber's master. If she were to die, the Einzbern camp would undoubtedly be

defeated. This woman should be the key piece that must escape no matter what the cost is.

"Woman, this may surprise you, but I did not come to defeat you."

Before this enemy Master, such words were equivalent to abandoning battle. Though it was unlikely his opponent would believe him, Kirei at least attempted a negotiation. This new development deviated too far from his goal of meeting with Kiritsugu on the battlefield; Heaven's Feel was secondary to that. Of course, he did not expect his opponents to believe his words.

"I understand, Kirei Kotomine." Not anticipating this belief, the silver-haired maiden's reply served to further confuse Kirei.

"I know why you're here, but this is not negotiable. You will not reach Kiritsugu. . . . We will stop you here."

It was good for Irisviel that the Executor looked confused. The opponent had clearly underestimated her, and his carelessness was her chance for victory. Perhaps he knew the specialty of Einzbern magic and had figured out that she was not a combat magician. Irisviel pulled out the secret weapon hidden in her large sleeves. At first glance, it was no magic, only an unreliable item. A soft and thin metallic bouquet of wires dangled lightly between her fingers.

"Madam, this man is an Executor, an expert magus hunter! This is not an opponent who can be faced with only magic!"

Maiya, suppressing her pain, screamed on the ground. In response, Irisviel only smiled quietly.

"I have learned much from Kiritsugu, much more than just driving!"

As Maiya watched speechlessly and Kirei observed in surprise, Irisviel infused mana into the thin metallic threads. They unraveled, moving between Irisviel's hands like a living organism.

Kirei's understanding was half correct. The Einzbern family possessed magic that was designed to forge, create, and more importantly, use matter. Judging solely by magical ability, Irisviel was far superior to her husband—Kiritsugu could not have taught her any offensive magic. What he had taught her was not the way of life of a homunculus, but rather, to harness tears, laughter, joy and anger in her composition of life—the meaning of living. Along with this, he also gave her the determination to live on.

Kirei's understanding was also half wrong. Irisviel did have a method of using her magic for offense; a battle mode of sorts. It was something she learned from her husband, who always lived for battle. If she was to live on with him, she would have to face the test of survival one day, and face battle herself.

"Shape ist Leben![5]"

Weaving the magic through two small chants in one breath, this was Irisviel's true skill—the control of metallic shapes, a peerless secret.

The silvery thread crisscrossed repeatedly, drawing itself into complex shapes. Now crossing, now combining, like a hand-woven piece, it took on a complex solid shape. Fierce wings, a beak, and sharp claws protruding from the base form of a giant eagle, it was an intricate silvery work of art. No, this was no mere framework —

5 Shape, be alive!

With a metallic sound like clashing blades, the silver-threaded eagle screeched, and soared from Irisviel's hands. It was an ad-hoc creation by an alchemy-using homunculus, a weapon brought to life by Irisviel, whose fate now hung in the balance. The bullet-like flight far surpassed Kirei's imagination. Surprised, he dodged the attack, but the razor-sharp beak still brushed his nose.

The first strike missed, the silver-threaded eagle started to circle above Kirei's head. This time, it dived downward, both claws poised ahead, targetting Kirei's face. But he was an Executor; he would not be only on the defensive. Fearless of the sharp claws, he attacked the eagle with a powerful fist strike. The sharply descending eagle could not change its flight path, and took the blow on its abdomen.

To Kirei's surprise, the eagle, struck by his fist, reverted to shapeless silver thread and wrapped around his right fist like vines. He immediately pulled at them with his left hand, but that soon became trapped as well. What was an eagle-shaped weapon only moments ago now became like handcuffs, tightly trapping Kirei's hands.

As an Executor, Kirei had fought countless magi to the death. Grunting lightly, he charged at Irisviel. It did not matter if his hands were trapped; as long as he could deliver a kick up close, the battle would be decided.

"How naïve!"Irisviel scolded as she poured more mana into the silver threads. Not even Kirei can hold out this time. He lost his balance as the silver threads wrapped around the tree tightly and pulled him toward it. Finally, it bound him firmly against the tree trunk. The grown tree was more than 30cm thick; even with his

outrageous strength, it was impossible to break or uproot the tree. At last, he was completely immobile.

Even then, Irisviel was steadily losing her advantage. Kirei's hands should have been overpowered by the pressure of the silver thread, but his muscles were trained to a steel-like tone, and powerful beyond belief. The silvery threads almost broke, struggling in a saturated state of near-collapse; she had to maintain their integrity with mana to keep them tight and prevent them from breaking.

"... Maiya-san ... Hurry!"

The key to victory was Maiya, still prone. She was the only one who could deliver the final blow. As long as she stayed out of the range of his kicks, a simple shot to the exposed head was enough; he could not cover his head in his current state.

Receiving momentary respite, the injured Maiya recovered sensation in her hands and feet. Moaning in pain from her broken ribs, she moved slowly to the abandoned Calico. Victory or defeat was decided by a battle of willpower measured by seconds. Clenching her teeth in pain from the magical backlash, Irisviel encouraged herself. As long as she could buy enough time for Maiya to fire the gun, everything would turn out fine. They could eliminate Kirei Kotomine, the greatest threat to Kiritsugu.

But the two women had underestimated the terror of an Executor of the Church. With no knowledge of Chinese kungfu, Irisviel thought it necessary only to bind Kirei's hands to render him helpless; she could hardly be blamed. For someone so highly trained, the entire body was a weapon. He planted both feet on the ground ...

"Boom!" The deafening sound rendered Irisviel speechless. The tree trunk shook erratically. That sound could only be made by one striking a tree with full strength. The strike sounded clearly again. This time, doubting her ears, she heard the chilling sound of breakage. She could not see the situation, but Irisviel understood through the touch of her silver threads. Large cracks had appeared in the tree trunk Kirei was bound to, at the spot directly below his hands. Kirei, the back of his hands pressing against the bark, was striking at the tree trunk with all of his strength.

Irisviel could not have known this: the strength of a martial arts master was not produced at the wrist. The strength of the feet on the ground, the turning of the back, and the twisting of shoulders—with these, it was possible to instantaneously release a burst of power in the fists. To an expert, the strength of the arm was insignificant compared to the power of the whole body. One can press the fist next to the target and strike solely with a force external to the arm—this was the hidden technique of explosive force.

The sound of the third strike shook the forest. This was much stronger than before. The tree trunk groaned one last time as the broken fibers broke with loud cracks, and collapsed, depriving the threads of their binding support. Grabbing the thread with both hands, Kirei nonchalantly escaped the silvery ring at the point of collapse and pulled the thread apart link by link. Irisviel fell to her knees instantly from the powerful backlash of her broken magic. Calmly stepping forward in the manner of a victorious conqueror, Kirei looked into the despairing eyes of the two women and strode

to the Calico, easily crushing its wooden frame under his hammerlike feet.

"Bastard . . ."

Still unable to stand back up, the prostrate Maiya moaned viciously. Throwing her a bored glance, Kirei casually kicked her in the stomach with the tip of his foot. Sobbing convulsively, Maiya fainted in agony and rolled over, perfectly still this time. Kirei, with a look devoid of expression, now laid his gaze on Irisviel.

– 130:32:40

The battlefield of the Heroic Spirits had become a miry swamp.

The horde of alien demonic monsters streamed forth endlessly regardless of how many were slaughtered, piling into mountains of corpses. The spraying innards and bodily fluids mixed, kicked and stirred by two pairs of feet, forming a chaos more terrifying than Hell itself. More rancid that the stench of rot, the acrid odor of demonic monster entrails filled the air, thick as mist, like lethal poisonous gas. A human would probably die of lung corrosion from inhaling it.

By now, the number of enemies cut down by Saber and Lancer had long surpassed five hundred.

"... To make no progress in a long time, this is a surprise beyond amazement."

Lancer showed no sign of fatigue, but he muttered bitterly. The tide of battle could not be determined. Despite facing the might of two knight class Servants, the number of alien demons did not decrease as they, summoned again and again, filled the gaps in the encircling horde. "It's that grimoire, Lancer. As long as his Noble Phantasm is here, this situation will not change."

"I see. So that's what it is." Lancer sighed despondently at Saber's words. "But to remove that tome from those cowardly hands, we will have to break through this wall of minions."

The demonic monsters grouped together and approached them slowly as they waved their tentacles mockingly. Perhaps, as alien creatures, they did not fear death or feel pain. Seemingly seeking

fulfillment in their slaughter, they endlessly attacked the two Servants. Against Saber and Lancer, Caster continued his battle of attrition. The prana he and his noble Phantasm wielded was as good as inexhaustible. Victory was as good as promised with this strategy.

"At such desperate juncture, how about a gamble, Lancer?"

"Though I be annoyed at appearing outlasted, cavorting with his minions accomplishes nought. I accept this your offer, Saber."

With Lancer's ready consent, Saber stared at the repulsive wall of flesh stretching all the way back to Caster, carefully estimating its thickness and density. This was her greatest secret skill—battlefield intuition informed her the idea was feasible, and worth placing all stakes on. "I will open a path; there will only be one chance. Lancer. Can you run with the wind?"

"Hm? —Huh, so that was your idea? Readily accomplished."

Despite Saber's puzzling words, Lancer nodded smilingly. Though they had only crossed blades once, they were still enemies who fought with their lives on the line. Etched into the memory of each were all the secret techniques of the other. Even without explanation, Lancer knew Saber's skills and understood her intentions.

"What are you mumbling so quietly? Your dying prayers, perhaps?" Caster mocked the two Servants calmly and evenly. Right now, he was not the one fighting Saber and Lancer; his Noble Phantasm, Prelati's Spellbook, took on that task in his place. He was like an audience observing, the battle from outside the ring. His elegant, composed taunt was enough of an attack.

"Feel the terror. Feel the despair! There is a limit to the difference in numbers that brute force can overcome. Hahaha! It's humiliating, isn't it? To be crushed and suffocated by these ignoble, nameless evils! For heroes, there is no humiliation greater than this!"

Awashed with her opponent's joyful scorn, Saber, emotionless and unfaltering, merely wielded the sword in her right hand with a decisive and calm expression. Her unwavering eyes stared only at the victory that must be obtained. "Haha, that beautiful face . . . now twist in agony for me, Jeanne!"

The horde of demonic monsters roared in unison. They surged toward the center of their ring for the kill, making alien strange sounds that could not be indistinguished as joy or hatred. It was time to decide the victor. In a loud voice, the King of Knights commanded the noble holy sword.

"Strike Air!" From the eye of the whirling air, resplendent brilliance shone forth. The sheath of high-pressure air protecting the holy sword, released from the invisible barrier's bounds, bellowed forth like a savage dragon's roar.

—A secret sword technique that guaranteed the kill. It was a different way to use the Noble Phantasm, Invisible Air. Last night, in the battle against Lancer, she had released this extreme air pressure to accelerate quickly. Released toward the enemy, it became a tempest, a crushing hammer that blew away whole armies.

Thoughtlessly packed together, the demonic beasts took the blow hard. The super high pressure tempest, compacting like a solid force, smashed the demonic monsters to smithereens; minced

flesh mixed with gravel and broken wood, as though an invisible giant hand had swept across the ground and opened a straight path. Blown apart by the air pressure, a perfect gap appeared in the demonic monsters' ranks. The destructive power of Strike Air was diminished by the many layers of demonic monsters, petering into a strong gust of wind that merely fluttered the ends of Caster's robe. The gap would make a path. However, against the crowd of demonic monsters summoned, it served only as a temporary opening that could be easily sealed off.

"What—?!"

Even so, Caster still exclaimed in shock. Not only the blow of wind had penetrated the ranks. Objects moving with great speed through the atmosphere cleave the air ahead of them, leaving a vacuum behind. That vacuum draws in the surrounding air, forming a tail surge behind the passing object. There exist techniques in autoracing whereby cars follow right behind the car in front, using its slipstream to boost their own acceleration. The air pressure from the Saber's release of Invisible Air triggered a similar phenomenon. It created a vacuum behind the passing gale as it tunneled through the army of demonic monsters, creating a funneling point of in-rushing air.

Lancer, awaiting this strike, sprang into the converging surge without hesitation with a yell. "Come, prepare yourself!" It was an ultimate skill that demanded superhuman physique on top of complete synchronization with his partner. He achieved this miracle after watching Saber's secret sword of wind just once. With a single leap, Lancer passed through the twirling passage surrounded by gales of blood and flesh, like a swallow with its

feathered wings tucked in close to its side as it chased the wind. When his feet once again touched the earth, he was barely ten strides away from Caster, with only unobstructed ground between them.

"I have you now, Caster!"

The demonic monsters that turned around at their master's crisis stretched their tentacles together toward Lancer's back. But Lancer did not turn back. Brandishing the short spear like a windmill behind him in his left hand, he cut down the pursuing attacks while he turned and approached Caster with the long spear in his right hand extended. He was just short of the killing blow. The long spear's strike resulted in the tip only cutting slightly into the surface, and no serious wound was made. But the Noble Phantasm in the enchanting spearman's hand was a weapon that could decide the victor with only a slight touch. "Gouge, Gáe Dearg!" His growl was followed by a crimson stab. The tip of the spear touched not Caster's fragile body, but the cover of the grimoire in his hand.

That was the red spearhead which once penetrated Saber's Invisible Air and canceled out her magical armor. It was a fatal Noble Phantasm killer, capable of severing all ties of prana. To Caster, completely reliant on the mighty power of the grimoire to summon demonic monsters under his manipulation, it was a decisive blow equal to a checkmate.

"Boom!" A rumble, akin to waves breaking against shore rocks, echoed in the forest. The countless alien demonic monsters liquefied in the blink of an eye. Originally created from the flesh and blood of the sacrifices, they turned back into blood and

scattered. With the prana supply from Prelati's Spellbook cut off, they had lost the power to materialize. Within the hands of the rapidly retreating Caster, the grimoire immediately reactivated its ability as a prana furnace and quickly regenerated the damaged cover. The prana was only cut off during the brief moment when Gáe Dearg's blade was in contact with the grimoire; the spear had no power to damage the Noble Phantasm itself. But once canceled, the magecraft could not be salvaged. The holy sword and twin spears would not give him time to repeat the summoning spell as he wished.

"You bastard—you evil evil bastard!!"

Faced with such a desperate situation, Caster's expression twisted until his eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he started foaming around the mouth in his rage.

Lancer nonchalantly smiled the rascally smile he was born with. "How was that? Now that Saber's taken back her left hand, she could easily finish this with her little finger."

Unlike Lancer, Saber was in no mood for capering. Until the moment victory was decided, the only things echoing in her mind were the final screams and tears the children emitted as they were torn apart and cruelly slaughtered.

"... Prepare yourself well, heretic." The King of Knights muttered in a quiet sound of anger as she lifted the golden holy sword with her right hand. The sword tip was pointed right at Caster.

– 130:32:31

Anger ate away at Kayneth like acid, drop by drop. He was a first-rate magus. He never lost his composure to emotion, especially not in a life-or-death situation. In a real duel of secret craft between first-rate magi colleagues, he would not be harboring such things as anger at all. He would probably admire and acknowledge the opponent's ability, calmly analyze its true value, and concentrate on performing magecraft that would serve as a proper reply to the enemy's craft. Those noble, flamboyant, gentlemanly games were his idea of battles. With the right to the Holy Grail at stake, he aimed to compete with Tousaka Tokiomi, Matou Zouken, and four unknown yet outstanding opponents, arriving at this desolate place in the far East.

However—the pain of his right shoulder wound throbbed, invading his senses mockingly, and the pain refused to subside, as though humiliating him. This was not a wound taken in battle; this was not fit to be called a battle. It was as though he had stepped on a piece of rotten floor board, tipped over a steaming pot, or gotten his best suit dirtied with mud. The opponent was insignificant as an ant, and not at all worthy to be an enemy—rubbish to make him feel dirty and unpleasant on sight. To be angered by something like that, and risk his pride as Lord El-Melloi, would be unthinkable.

Just daily hassles; like being bitten by a stray dog. Just bad luck; dismiss it as a simple misfortune. Even as he tried to convince himself in this way—he screamed at the agony of his

shoulder wound. The severe pain made him feel like one being burnt slowly from inside, tormenting him and eating away at his pride.

Kayneth's icy cold face was expressionless as a mask; he was not swearing loudly or gritting his teeth. To an observer, that was not the expression of someone in anger. Indeed. He did not hate anyone. All his anger was directed inwards. He was merely provoked by a situation that surprised him—something impossible, beyond all reason. Impossible—

This untargeted rage became destructive impulses that spread to Volumen Hydragyrum. Kayneth smashed the walls of the corridors around him with his whips of blades. *That base scum made me bleed . . . Impossible! How could this have happened?!* With a somnabulant gait, Kayneth pursued Emiya Kiritsugu, who had already fled. The shapeless mercury lump chased him in its master's place, full of murderous intent.

The door in his way was not pushed open, but smashed apart by the mercury's weight. Flower vases, paintings, elegant furniture: all that entered his sight was smashed and destroyed. There were many traps along the way. Wires were tripped by Kayneth's defenseless feet, and fuses in the carpet were triggered, causing pre-set grenades to explode or mines to disperse shrapnel. At those times, the protective mercury membrane expanded immediately, rushing forward to block it. Those set traps were like toys made to fool children—so ridiculous that Kayneth wanted to laugh. But the sound of his laughter mocked Kayneth, for being hurt by these tricks meant for children.

Self-mockery cut his pride like a razor. That humiliation inflamed the anger in his heart even more. Lord El-Melloi's admirable Mystic Code was not made for such foolish tricks. His mercury should have been a weapon that took Gandr shots, deflected magical swords, broke through supernatural fire, ice and lightning. It should have been a craft that inspired marvel, reverence in any magus who hated him, a craft that would soon deliver them death. What was this current distasteful situation?

The opponent he had unleashed his proud Mystic Code on was nothing more than an unknown mouse . . . Every passing second humiliated him further. The wound on his shoulder was hurting worse and worse. He was in an endless hysterical downward spiral —but at its center, he caught sight of its conclusion. No matter how large the castle, the possibility of escape diminished as one ran upwards. The mouse had been chased to the end of the corridor on the third floor. The stream of mercury Kayneth had sent out earlier accurately located him this time. The target seemed dead set on holding his ground, probably determined to stage the final confrontation with Kayneth there.

Confrontation—as that word floated into Kayneth's mind, he could not help but let out a laugh. The enemy had not given up. So that was it. He had wounded Kayneth once; by the same grace of luck, he might have some chance of victory—a decision made in the spirit of the desperate mouse trying to bite the cat.

"Fool . . ." Kayneth's tight mouth twisted into a sneer.

It was not through skill or strategy that the mouse had managed to touch Kayneth. It was mere coincidence, with no reason behind it. He would teach the mouse the difference. Not a

confrontation; this would be an execution. This would be slaughter. Kayneth, his body saturated with intent to kill, turned the final corner with his Mystic Code and arrived at the end of the corridor,

The setting of this third confrontation with Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald was in accord with Emiya Kiritsugu's expectations. The distance was barely thirty meters. The width of the corridor was just over six meters. There was no place to hide, no place to retreat.

In a radius of seven and a half meters, Kayneth's Volumen Hydragyrum had potentially fatal speed and power. The initiative would remain with Kiritsugu until Kayneth was in range.

In his left hand, fifty rounds of 9mm bullets in a fresh helical magazine. The Calico awaited the moment to open fire. In his right hand, his Mystic Code, the Contender Custom. The magecraft bullet was already loaded in the single-shot chamber.

Kiritsugu showed no fear and begged for no mercy, standing in silence wielding the two guns. At the sight, Kayneth grew even more unpleasant, his expression twisting as he uttered mocking insults. "Surely you did not think the same trick would work again, did you, you despicable thing?"

It would not work; it would be problematic for Kiritsugu if it did work. No need to tell him this. Kiritsugu needed Kayneth to think him stupid enough to try the same attack.

"This will be no simple death. I will heal only your lungs and heart, keeping them alive, and then I will slowly deal with you starting from your toes." Kayneth said sinisterly as he slowly

stepped toward Kiritsugu. Volumen Hydragynum twirled beside him, flexing its countless whips dauntingly as the sharp tips shook.

"Die in regret, pain, and despair. And curse when you die; curse the cowardice of your employer—the Einsbern Master who humiliated the Holy Grail War!"

Right—Kiritsugu sniggered in his heart, regarded the proclamation as a forgettable breeze. The Master substitution plan he proposed had worked after all.

Fifteen meters. If he was to make a move, now was the time.

Aiming at Kayneth, who loomed ever nearer, Kiritsugu first fired a rain of 9mm bullets from the Calico in full-automatic. It was an identical replay of that sneak attack on the first floor corridor—a pinning attack to trigger Volumen Hydragynum's automatic defence, a feint to weaken its defensive membrane and soften it for the next strike. Lord El-Melloi would not fall for the same trick twice.

"Fervor, mei sanguis!"

The mercury activated its defense immediately, but it did not form a membrane this time. Volumen Hydragynum leapt in front of its master, forming countless spikes from the floor to the ceiling like a thick bamboo forest covering Kayneth's entire body, blocking all bullets that flew near. If not up against a flame or mist attack, there was no need to use a membrane defense. Projectiles would be harmless as long as their straight-line trajectories were disrupted. Walls of columns would be enough for defense.

Of course, the prana required to create this mountain of swords could not be compared to that required for a membrane.

Every single spike, twirled as thin as a steel wire, had to be equipped with enough strength and malleability to deflect bullets. This automatic defense drew all the prana in Kayneth's possession. The inherited Magic Crests of the Archibald family on his shoulders circulated to their ultimate limit, causing the practitioner extraordinary pain. The defense this time was truly impregnable. The bullets, hindered by the silver mountain of swords, ricocheted in the gaps between the numerous spikes, making a metallic racket before finally losing all energy and falling to the ground. Not one of them reached Kayneth's body.

The Contender in Kiritsugu's right hand roared, spitting out a single shot; a similar bullet had given Kayneth that despicable scar the first time it penetrated Volumen Hydragynum's defenses with far more destructive power than the 9mm bullets. However, the mercury mountain of swords put up a resistance of much greater magnitude. The spikes closed up like a Venus flytrap before the shot touched them, surrounding the bullet. The thick cluster of thin spikes became a single giant column in the blink of an eye, sealing off the .30—06 Springfield bullet.

Volumen Hydragynum, created to interchange between forms freely, now demonstrated the marvels it could achieve. The immaculate skill that controlled the magecraft of fluidics to such perfection should indeed be the epitome of this unparalleled craft, a skill that beseemed the prestigious name of the Archibald house.

The moment he beautifully completed this magecraft he had devoted all his skill to, Lord El-Melloi's destiny also came to its end.

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Even a Master and Servant, partners in a contract, need communication techniques, such as speech, to establish a connection when they were a large distance apart. But if the two were bonded by a Command Seal, one party would quickly detect a disturbance in the other's aura if the other was in a life-threatening crisis. Therefore, Kayneth's dire situation was swiftly transmitted to Lancer, who was still in the forest.

"What—?!"

Lancer suddenly turned to look in the direction of the Einsbern castle, right after he destroyed Caster's army of demonic monsters and he was prepared to finish off the nemesis with Saber. For the first time, Lancer realized that his Master, whom he thought was observing his battle behind the frontline, had already entered the enemy formation and undertaken another battle. Lancer's momentary wavering was a god-send for the desperate Caster. Prelati's Spellbook, already regenerated in Caster's hand, throbbed with torrents of prana. Naturally, Saber did not stand aside and leave the magus's spells alone.

"Your struggle is futile!"

The holy sword in her right hand, Saber rushed forward, trying to defeat the enemy before he could complete his incantation. But Caster was no fool to chant his incantations before a blade. Speaking not a single syllable of incantation, he chaotically released the surge of prana produced by the Noble Phantasm. Although the summoning magecraft was nullified, the pools of blood staining the ground were still connected to the

prana. The prana that spurted out, uncontrolled, flowed into that mesh of blood, but finally scattered apart without forming any shape.

Her sight was blocked before she got close enough to strike. Even Saber made no rash moves and stopped her steps. Caster had not intended to complete the spell, forcibly activating a magecraft that was bound to fail. That was enough in this situation. The blood that formed no summoned monsters immediately boiled and evaporated from the saturated prana, spreading out into a crimson fog. This was an imprudent skill that could only be used with the enormous amount of prana provided by a Noble Phantasm.

It was what he expected: a blinding mist. Even Caster, overconfident as he was, deduced the impossibility of reversing the situation and arriving at victory in this state. The magus quickly dematerialized while the bloody mist obscured Saber and Lancer's sight. Faced with two of the three knight classes, he did not even have time to leave word. Swallowing anger and humiliation, Caster rapidly left the battlefield in spiritual form. Luckily for Caster, Saber did not have the ability to pursue him in spirit form. Lancer, who did, was otherwise engaged by his Master's crisis.

"Mongrel . . . What unbelievable cowardice." Saber commented angrily as she withdrew Invisible Air from the surrounding atmosphere. The refreshing wind immediately blew in from all directions, scattering the filth of the blood mist. By the time the two Servants regained their sight and Invisible Air once again

concealed the holy sword's form, even Caster's spiritual aura had disappeared, not to mention his physical figure.

"Lancer, what's wrong?"

Lancer could easily have chased their enemy; he let Caster escape instead. Saber did not heckle him, but questioned calmly. From his changed expression, it was obvious that something had happened.

"My lord is in trouble . . . He seems to have left me and attacked your headquarters." Lancer explained hesitantly. Saber figured the probable outcome and put on a dejected expression. Then . . . everything did happen according to Kiritsugu's plans. It was not what she wanted. She would not deny the tactic of deception, but the cruel trap that Kiritsugu set did not agree with the King of Knights' principle of standing stoically in the battlefield no matter what happened.

"It must be my Master's work. Lancer, you should hurry. Go and save your lord."

Initially dumbfounded by Saber's unhesitating urging, the spearman bowed his head deeply in thanks. For Saber, this decision was equivalent to disobeying her own lord. Holding Lancer here so his Master could be killed would be the reasonable choice to make so as to win the Holy Grail War. But along this train of thought, there was no need for Lancer to save her from her crisis by fighting Caster. He did not think himself stupid then, and would not think Saber foolish now.

"I am in your debt, King of Knights."

"Worry not. We swore to have a duel between knights; let us honor that glory to the end."

Lancer nodded briefly, then disappeared in spirit form. In that manner, he flew toward the castle in the depth of the forest, a whirl of wind.

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When the Emiya family one generation ago determined the origin[6] of their son and heir, the strange results they obtained put them at a loss, and they named him "Kiritsugu" because of it. He possessed the dual attributes of "Fire" and "Earth." They were composite attributes, "Severing" and "Binding." That was the form of his soul at birth, and the true form of his origin. Severing and binding—this is not the same as destruction and rebirth, because Kiritsugu's origin had no meaning of recovery. A string that was cut and then reconnected again would have changed its thickness at the point where the knot was tied; the action of severing and binding had caused irreversible corruption in the target.

Kiritsugu became particularly aware of his origin when he was asked to complete some hands-on work. His hands were not very skilled; He could fix a normal contraption if it broke down, but when it came to delicate machinery, everything was reversed. The greater his wish to fix it, the worse the damage for the machine. Kiritsugu's handcraft was unextraordinary. If a normal metal wire snapped, its original function could be restored by connecting it back together. However, if he fixed a delicate electric circuit by the

6 The starting point that defines one's existence and directs one's actions throughout life. (From TYPE-MOON wiki)
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same principles, the result would be disastrous. Merely connecting everything was not enough to make it work; if the connections fell out of order, the circuit would lose its function. This was not a result of Kiritsugu's personality or temperament. From the perspective of magecraft, it was the true essence of the root deep within his soul.

He utilized his extraordinary origin to its fullest extent when he created his Mystic Code. The first and second ribs on both sides were cut and extracted from his body. The extracted ribs were ground into bone ash, condensed with a craft to preserve the soul, and sealed within the core of sixty-six bullets. Those bullets would manifest Kiritsugu's origin in the target on impact. If it were to hit a living creature, there would be no wounds or bleeding, but the point of entry would appear to be suffering necrosis. It would be healed on the surface, but the nerves and capillaries would not regenerate properly, and its original functionality would be lost.

As a Conceptual Weapon, this bullet posed an even graver threat to magi in particular. Kiritsugu had already used thirty-seven bullets, but not a single one of them was wasted. The bullets, made with his body, had already annihilated thirty-seven magi. Now, the thirty-eighth origin bullet proceeded to sever the life force of a new sacrifice. Kayneth did not comprehend what was happening to his body until the end. The moment the excruciating pain spread in his body, all his vital organs and nerves were mutilated into a shapeless mess.

Before a scream could escape his throat, he was already spurting blood. The muscles in his body spasmed, the uncoordinated twitches conducted by a nervous system on the

edge of collapse. The lean body clad in the chic suit began to perform a ridiculous dance. Intense pressure forced the densely-packed prana, circulating through Magic Circuits, to suddenly ignore the determined paths and flow chaotically, destroying the practitioner's body in the process. The moment Volumen Hydragyrum blocked the Contender's strike, Kayneth suffered damage more severe than a direct hit from a bullet.

When his magecraft bullet was obstructed by other magecraft, the impact of his origin would reach all the way to the Magic Circuits of the practitioner. If a magus's Magic Circuits were a high-voltage power cable, Kiritsugu's bullet would be a drop of water. What would happen if a conductive liquid came into contact with a thickly laid electrical circuit? The short-circuiting current would destroy the circuit, causing permanent damage. In the same way, the shorting of Magic Circuits was the terrifying effect of Kiritsugu's Mystic Code. To avoid damage from Kiritsugu's magecraft bullets, one had to set magecraft aside and block the bullet by purely physical means. In this light, Kiritsugu's choice of .30–06 Springfield bullets was malicious indeed; there was nothing that could completely block this specialized hunting rifle round to begin with. This was a bullet with most excellent penetrating capabilities. One could not avoid getting hurt without being in an armored vehicle. Only one shot would be enough. Kiritsugu daringly chose a gun unsuited for real combat—the Thompson Contender—as his Mystic Code, as it was the handgun that could deal the most physical damage.

The gun had accomplished its duty. Kiritsugu placed his finger on the trigger guard spool and swung the long barrel downwards,

as though throwing off a blood stain. The momentum threw the empty cartridge from the open magazine into the air, and it clattered onto the marble floor releasing a faint trace of sulfur. Kiritsugu felt nothing in this victory. It was exactly the same as his past battles, a successful taunt ending in a calculated conclusion. That was all.

The destructive power of Kiritsugu's magecraft bullet depended on the number of Magic Circuits activated in the target when the bullet hit, since it was the target's prana that was responsible for his own destruction. This made things all the more fatal for Kayneth, who had been continuously provoked into using the utmost amount of prana in his possession; he granted Kiritsugu the best result he could hope for. Even the mighty Volumen Hydragyrum was finished if the practitioner's prana was cut off. Kayneth lay recumbent in the sea of mercury—now reverted to its original shape and spreading all over the floor—his body twitching slightly. Lord El-Melloi was now harmless as a baby. His body may never recover ordinary human function, let alone his magus powers.

Though Kayneth would eventually die if left alone, Kiritsugu still intended to deliver a final blow to the fallen enemy, as a manner of principle. Switching the Calico to semi-automatic mode, he walked toward Kayneth, who positively resembled a breathing corpse. He would fire one shot into his head at critical distance, and one of the seven Heaven's Feel participants would drop out. But just then, Kiritsugu felt a mighty aura of prana approaching him intimidatingly, and frowned. Without hesitation, Kiritsugu held up the Calico and took aim, firing repeatedly at

Kayneth. The bullets emitted sparks in the empty air, spraying in all directions and disappearing. The twin spears of red and yellow moved too fast for the eye to see.

Now facing Lancer, who had materialized into position to protect Kayneth, Kiritsugu was taken aback. Stopped by the enemy's Servant at this time; this was certainly unexpected. Kiritsugu thought Saber had intercepted Lancer, based on Kayneth's lone entry into the castle. How did the spearman get past the King of Knights? He would have sensed her disappearance from cessation of the prana drain if she had been defeated, but his prana was still being absorbed by Saber somewhere; his Servant was still in one piece. There was only one conclusion—Saber had stepped out of Lancer's way voluntarily.

Lancer stared at Kiritsugu, who was mentally wavering, with a look as cold as ice. Shifting both spears to his right hand, he scooped Kayneth's body with his now-empty left hand. Kiritsugu did not take the opportunity to pull off a rash attack; he had just confirmed that bullets were useless on Servants.

"You should understand just how easy it is to pierce you through right here, Master of Saber."

Lancer, had he not heard Saber's earlier words, would have found it very hard to believe that this man before him, who looked nothing like a magus, was in truth the Einsbern Master. But he knew his lord's strength. If this man had managed to break through Lord El-Melloi's magecraft, there was no reason for suspicion. However—no, for that reason, Lancer's spear tip was not pointed at Kiritsugu.

"I will not let you kill my Master, but I will not kill you either, Master of Saber. Neither I nor she want to end things this way."

Is that so? Kiritsugu once again regretted the conflicting personalities of him and his contracted Servant.

"Forget this not: your life was spared because of the King of Knight's great nobility." Delivering the declaration with cold sarcasm, Lancer leapt out of the castle with Kayneth, breaking the glass window with his torso. Chasing him would be foolish; Kiritsugu knew that. As Lancer had said, that would be suicidal. There was nothing Kiritsugu could do without Saber present. No —even if Saber was beside him, could he entrust this to her?

Though Lancer, the Heroic Spirit Diarmuid, was naïve, Saber's idiotic chivalry easily rivalled that naïvete. It exceeded Kiritsugu's comprehension. In her conviction, Lancer would not kill Kiritsugu. Something must be wrong with her. How could the King of Knights do a thing like exposing her own Master to the enemy's Servant alone? Had Lancer gone back on his word, the Holy Grail War would have ended right there for her. Even if he had no such intentions, if Kayneth was still conscious, he could have used a Command Seal to demand it of him. Did she not consider such a possibility? Kiritsugu contemplated this rationally, and lit the cigarette in his mouth.

How ironic; A Heroic Spirit, estranged from her own Master, had forged a foolish trust with an enemy Servant all by herself. He should have chosen his Servant more carefully after all. Kiritsugu now felt this pang of regret more greatly than ever, and puffed the hazy smoke with a sigh.

– 130:32:15

"Woman, Let me ask you a question." Saying this with a deep voice, Kotomine Kirei slowly walked toward the woman who, standing helplessly aside, had no options for resistance. The black-haired woman who served as her bodyguard, lying on the ground like a rag doll, implacably beaten by him, was no longer a threat.

"Both of you seem to have challenged me to protect Kiritsugu. Whose intention is that?"

Kirei grasped and gently raised the silent Einsbern's homunculus with one hand. Her statue-like, demure and beautiful face was torn with grief. "I'll ask again. Woman, under whose orders did you two fight me?"

The answer was of great interest to Kirei. Who had set such a pointless obstacle in his path to Kiritsugu? That truth is very important for him.

But Kirei did see through one thing. No matter how he searched, there were no Command Seals on the body of the homunculus. She was no Master. This recent, rash move was one that no Master would have made. It was as he and Tokiomi had known from the start—Emiya Kiritsugu was indeed Saber's master, and these women were merely his pawns.

Now, the troublesome part. If it was Kiritsugu who commanded these women to fight him, then he had greatly underestimated Kirei. These women were hardly worthy adversaries, having been defeated without much effort. There was also the possibility that someone else had ordered this. Einsbern's

main goal was to conceal Kiritsugu, the Master. To this end they would sacrifice anything. They were probably willing to sacrifice their lives just to gain some time.

Still, every possibility led to this one question. Kirei carefully looked again at the face of the silver-haired girl who was gasping for air. It was a doll-like face, too beautiful and well-crafted. Her red pupils were like rubies. She was exactly like the portrait of the "Lady of Winter," Lizleihi Justizia von Einsbern, that was passed down through the ages. This homunculus was no Master, but she still participated in the Holy Grail War. So, she was the marionette bearing the responsibility of being the Grail Vessel. She would be a being of great importance in the final stages of the Holy Grail War. To send such a pawn to the front line of the war and expose her to danger; it was definitely not a foolish move made by amateurs facing a lack of manpower.

Kirei suddenly felt a strange sense of weight on the tip of his toes, and looked down. Unnoticed prior because of its subtlety and unworthiness, the weak, painful gasps that started from the ground were now beside Kirei's feet. Covered in wounds, the black-haired woman stretched out a trembling hand and caught Kirei's right leg. The grip was weak, but it was all the strength she has left in her body. Even if she had no strength to stand or to clench her fists, those dim eyes nevertheless burned with hatred, and fixed their gaze upon Kirei unwaveringly.

Without a word, Kirei lifted his foot and mercilessly trampled the broken-ribbed chest. The woman, unable to even wail, let out no sound of pain, only a tragic gulping sound produced by the air squeezed from her lungs. Still, she did not let her hands go. As if

driven by the current, firmly attached to a trunk, her weak hands grasped Kirei's arm, but she kept staring at Kirei with an expression of hatred. Kirei shifted his gaze back to the silver-haired woman, lifted in mid-air. The homunculus, although muffled and twisting her body painfully, reflected no terror in her face. That in itself did not surprise Kirei; an imitation of humans, it was only natural that it had no feelings, no fear of death or pain. But this was not so. The red eyes of the homunculus, staring at Kirei, were certainly full of hatred and anger. Suspended in mid-air, both women glared furiously at Kirei with eyes full of hatred.

"—I won't let you pass from here."

"—Even at the cost of my life, I'll stop you here."

Neither woman answered Kirei's question. Who could have been the one who ordered them to attack Kirei? From any perspective, there were contradictions in the reasoning. Kirei considered another situation. What if these women were not following instructions, but acting according to their own will, and fighting Kirei? That was another possibility that could not be ignored.

A familiar spiritual body suddenly glided beside Kirei. Assassin's words were transmitted directly to Kirei's mind.

"Caster, Lancer and his Master have already finished their battle. They have left the forest. Saber will catch up soon. Master, it is very dangerous here."

Kirei calmly heard Assassin's report and nodded with disappointment. Doing anything there would be pointless. He would have no chance to confront Saber face-to-face. Even

retreating would be dangerous now. Was there only one recourse to stop Saber's pursuit?

Kirei drew new Black Keys from his cassock, and without hesitation—as though tearing cloth—casually stabbed the silver-haired homunculus's belly. The artificial woman let out a silent cry, and blood flowed from her mouth. *So it is red*—Kirei let out a bored sigh as he let the shaking body in his hand fall to the ground. Hurting her was unavoidable, but she would not die from blood loss in the next few minutes. Save her, or let her die and chase Kirei—Saber will soon show up, and will have to choose between these two options.

It was done. Kirei, without glancing back at the dying women, took the path he entered from, and dashed through the forest. There was no room for unnecessary thought after the fact. There was nothing important or worth remembering about the two females whom he had faced in the earlier death match. Still the gazes of those two people were imprinted in his mind. That was true hatred. Their killing intent definitely did not arise from their sense of duty or from their assigned job. Those women were not trying to achieve victory for the Einsberns, but protecting that man, Emiya Kiritsugu. If it was the former, both women would probably be in the city with Kiritsugu, fighting their enemies. But they did not employ such tactics, instead setting Kiritsugu aside and advancing defensively.

Even when away from Kiritsugu, they were willing to protect him, with a persistent desire to win a doomed battle. What trust and expectation did these women have toward Kiritsugu? With

battle skills on vastly different levels and victory impossible, what did they seek to protect with such actions?

To be so thoughtless and to do such a foolish thing . . . Kirei could only think of one reason for it. Faith—If those two were aiding Emiya Kiritsugu because of their faith in him, their foolish actions would be logical. But an important question remained. Women were frequently selfish beings. Sacrificing themselves to save him was something they could only do if they had fully accepted and comprehended him. In other words—was Emiya Kiritsugu someone who could be understood by others?

"That's not possible . . ."

Kirei's throat made a moaning, whispering sound. These contradictions could not be true. His expectations of Emiya Kiritsugu were completely overturned, an accident to his intuitions. Emiya Kiritsugu was an empty man. He should be a man on the verge of emptiness, without a reason to fight. Kirei looked forward to meeting such a man. Deep in Kiritsugu's heart, in that kind of lifestyle, resided the answer he was searching for. Kiritsugu must be a solitary man. Unaccepted and uncomprehended by anyone, he would be master of a soul separated from the world—just like Kirei. Kirei shrugged off the growing suspicions in his heart, as if escaping from those thoughts, and gritted his teeth as he ran through the forest alone.

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Irisviel heard a voice calling her from far away, and dimly opened her eyes. A familiar face and golden hair appeared, shining even more beautifully as it reflected the light.

"Irisviel, hang in there! Irisviel!"

"Saber . . .?"

Confirming the face as that of the King of Knights, a sense of safety swept her with relief, nearly causing her to collapse.

"No! Stay conscious! I'll call Kiritsugu right away. Hang on until then!"

". . . Kirei . . . . Where is the enemy?" Irisviel asked faintly. Saber frowned regretfully as she answered.

"He escaped. If I was only here a little earlier, this would not have happened."

". . . and Miss Maiya? . . ."

"Although also heavily wounded, her injuries are not life-threatening. Yours are worse by far! This bleeding wound of yours—"

Saber stopped halfway, astounded. The blood that was flowing from Irisviel's abdominal wound had suddenly stopped. Saber carefully rolled up the torn clothes, which were all stained with blood, but could find no trace of the wounds on her smooth skin.

"—Sorry, I scared you."

Irisviel got up painlessly from Saber's supporting arm. Her face ought to be pale, but it had already regained its color. The recent wound seemed like a mere illusion.

"Irisviel, What's—"

"It should be all right. Don't worry. Unlike magecraft for healing others, healing myself is pretty easy. My body was not created as a human's in the first place."

"Ah . . ."

Irisviel smiled gently at Saber, whose eyes were still open in surprise, and apologized in her heart for lying to this incomparably trusting knight. "It's all thanks to you, Saber . . ."

Though Irisviel's body was artificial from the perspective of magecraft, it did not have the ability to self-heal when the practitioner was unconscious. What healed her was a miracle that had nothing to do with Einsbern magecraft. The Noble Phantasm Avalon • All is a Distant Utopia—it heals all its bearer's wounds, and even stops his aging. The sheath of the holy sword Excalibur, the artifact used back at the Einsbern's castle to summon Heroic Spirit Arturia, was now sealed inside Irisviel as a Conceptual Weapon. Normally, such a trump card should be equipped by the Master, Kiritsugu. But as the front line substitute Master, he had left this utmost defensive Noble Phantasm in his wife Irisviel's hands for her protection. If its real owner Saber was not near prana support, the sheath's properties remained inactive. To Kiritsugu, who acted separately from Saber from the start, it was a useless thing.

Kiritsugu, not trusting his own Servant, had carefully asked Irisviel not to tell Saber about the sheath. But Irisviel felt uneasy in her heart about forcefully borrowing the Noble Phantasm of the King of Knights. It was a truly astounding power, and its effects were now confirmed. Before Saber arrived, she was undoubtedly in critical state. But just a touch from the King of

Knights' hand, and the wounds suddenly healed, her strength rapidly recovered—the work of a miraculous Noble Phantasm. Her Magic Circuits, broken by brute force, should have malfunctioned, but now worked without any problems. She would be able to use magecraft as always.

Next was treating Maiya's wounds. Though unconscious, she was not dying, but she did suffer serious wounds. Irisviel, looking at the wounds mercilessly inflicted on the body, realized again the terror of the man Kirei. The Executor was a monster. Against firearms and magecraft, he used only his physical capability to pulverize Irisviel and Maiya's combined attack. Such an enemy should never be allowed to approach Kiritsugu. Irisviel bit her lips in intimidation by his presence.

This victory could be called a miracle attained through persistence, but it was clearly luck. If Saber had been delayed in the battle with Caster or Lancer, Kirei would have reached the castle deep within the forest. This was not the end. Next time, Kirei would challenge Emiya Kiritsugu again.

"But I'm not protecting Kiritsugu alone . . . am I, Maiya?"

Maiya, anesthetized prior to healing, had her pained expression dissipated to a serene one. She had not regained consciousness yet. Without the usual rejecting, sinister expression on her sleeping face, she was like an innocent girl. She should be hating Maiya, but Irisviel was not inhuman anymore; she now possessed the soul of a woman, a wife who loved a man. She must thank Hisau Maiya, who told Irisviel her objectives in this war.

"Next time we must win. We'll protect him together . . ."

Swearing a new oath, Irisviel began to concentrate on healing Maiya's bruised body.

Act 8

– 122:18:42

Meat and wine adorned the table between rows of brilliant and shining candlesticks. In the large Midcuart banquet hall, the Erin nobles were gathered. Now is the climax. On this day, the boasting and drinking contests of ruffians were strictly forbidden. This evening, the uncultured warriors were drunk solely with the fragrance of a graceful flower.

This was a feast for loving the flower. Gráinne, the daughter of the High King of Ireland, Cormac mac Airt, would finally be betrothed. Her betrothed was to be Cumhaill's son, Fionn mac Cumhaill, he who received information from the oil of the Salmon of Knowledge, the great warrior who controlled the healing water. Unmatched under the heavens, he was the head of a Fianna, a group of knights. The warrior's strength and fame rivalled the High King's. There was no marriage engagement as joyful as this.

Accompanying the old warrior was his son, Oisín—a poet, and his grandchild as well—the warrior Oscar, and an almighty group of knights: the talented Caílte mac Rónáin; Druid Diorruing; Goll mac Morna—"Horror of the Battlefield"; Conan of the Gray Lashes; and finally, one more honorable than the highest honor—Diarmuid Ua Dubhine of the love spot. Each was a great warrior, inferior in no manner. Each adored and swore unwavering loyalty to Fionn, revering the great hero as their leader, and entrusting their swords, weapons and lives to that one man. This was a knight's honor; the true worth of warriors, told by bards and handed down through generations.

Yearning that path, undertaking that path, was something they believed without doubt even as they perished proudly in the battlefield at a fateful time. Until the banquet on that fated night, when one of them met that flower.

"In exchange for my love, accept the geis. My dear, by any possible means, annul this abominable marriage. Please take me away . . . to the ends of the earth!"

Appealing to him in tears, the eyes of the maiden flared earnestly with love. They could become the flames of Purgatory, burning him to ashes . . .

The hero understood. Yet, he did not refuse. The weight of a geis, which tested his honor, and the path of a

loyal subject, which he followed—he wondered which was more precious? No questioning or self-struggling yielded an answer. The thing which finally spurred him, a reason without any relation whatever, with his pride.

Hero and princess, together they held hands and turned from their brilliant futures. Before long, he became a Celtic legend handed down by word, and the curtains were lifted on a story of tragic love.

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Passing through a weird dream world, Kayneth woke up from his sleep. It was an ancient, distant scene, one he had neither seen nor experienced before, that was strangely not mysterious to him. Masters who had signed a contract with their Servants were said to be able to occasionally glimpse the memory of a Heroic Spirit in the form of a dream.

Kayneth, of course, was familiar with the legends associated with the Heroic Spirit he had summoned. But he never imagined he would experience the spectacle to such an extent; the dream he just had was unmistakably one of the scenes of "The Legend of Diarmuid and Gráinne."

"But ... Why am I here?"

Not fully awake yet, Kayneth looked around. He was lying in an empty room. The air, bearing a touch of dust in ruins, was dominated by the cold air of a winter night.
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Signs of human activity and visits prior were not to be found; it was a cold room filled only with machinery. He did not fail to recognize the place. After the collapse of Fuyuki Hyatt Hotel, this—the abandoned factory outside the city—had been his temporary hiding place. He tried to sift through his cloudy memory.

He was on the pursuit of Caster's tracks, and had struggled to the Einsbern forest. Then, with the battle of the Servants behind him, he had tried to confront Saber's master for a duel, on his own ... Attempting to remember the details, humiliation and anger surged forth like a broken dam. Jolted by this uncontrollable, violent fury, he tried to make a fist, and finally realized—

Although he had awoken from his sleep, he had no senses in his hands and legs at all.

"Wh— ..."

Driven by bewilderment and fear, Kayneth writhed in agony. His body remained motionless, lying face-up on a simple bed, his chest and back tightly bound by a belt. That explained his struggle to sit up, but his unresponsive hands and legs continued to elude his reason. Only his torso was tied down; his limbs were unbound, but unmovable, seemingly non-existent.

"... Looks like you have regained consciousness." Somewhere beyond his field of vision, his beloved fiancée's voice sounded. It was no longer the faultless sound he remembered.

"Sola?! This—what on earth ... Wh-why I am here?"

"Lancer carried you back. He rescued you from your predicament. What's the matter? You don't remember at all?"

"I was ..."

—Shot. In the Einsbern castle, just as he was about to kill that quack magus carrying a bag of cheap tricks and odd toys ... Yet, he should have been shielded from his enemy's bullets by Volumen Hydragum. He could clearly feel that moment when he was certain of his victory. However, his memory was interrupted there. Some unknown, excruciating pain had struck him—something had happened. When he came to, he was lying on his back. He was not even sure how much time had passed. Sola placed her fingers on Kayneth's arm in the manner of a palpating doctor. Kayneth's body senses were completely absent.

"There is evidence that the Magic Circuit in your whole body went berserk. Your internal organs were almost destroyed. The muscles and nerves were damaged throughout your body. It was a miracle you did not die instantly."

"... ... ..."

"For the time being, I had managed to restore only your internal organs. There is nothing I can do about your nerves. At this rate, even with time to heal, don't hope to be able to stand and run again. Besides that—"

Listening disinterestedly to his fiancée's diagnosis, Kayneth was gradually tormented by despair. Self-injury

from the rampage of one's prana: this was an end most dear to a magus, and more fatal than anything else. Though Kayneth felt incapable of making such an elementary mistake, he knew quite clearly what that end meant.

"Besides that—Kayneth, your Magic Circuit was completely destroyed. You will never use magecraft again."

"I . . . I . . ."

Tears welled in the eyes of Lord El-Melloi, once reputed to be a prodigy. Why had he received such ill-treatment? He did not understand at all. The world was supposed to bless him. A limitless future and eternal splendor were guaranteed for a genius like him. The principles which Kayneth trusted in collapsed with a great din, leaving nothing. Faced with such merciless truth, such incomprehensible insanity, he became frightened and broke down in tears. Kayneth right now was like an infant experiencing his first taste of fear.

"Don't cry, Kayneth. It is still too early to give up." Whispering in a comforting voice, Sola caressed his face. Whenever he needed it, her display of affection toward her fiancé often came slightly late. "The Holy Grail War is still ongoing. Kayneth, remember the fruits of your plans! As long as I, the source of prana, am still here, the contract with Lancer is still valid. We have not lost yet."

"... Sola?"

"If the Holy Grail is an omnipotent wish-granter, complete recovery for your body should be possible, right? It will be great to win. If you remain in the war and obtain the Holy Grail, everything will be back to normal."

Sola's words should have cheered Kayneth up and given him hope. This encouragement from her, his partner and supporting fiancée, ought to give him greater courage than anything else could. Yet, why did indescribable uneasiness blow through his heart like a draught? She held Kayneth's right arm, smiling like an affectionate mother—or perhaps at knowledge of his doubts. On the back of his hand—now impotent—there were still two Command Spells remaining.

"Therefore, Kayneth ... Please hand these Command Spells to me. I will take over as Master, to bring you the Holy Grail."

"N-no!" An immediate response from brute instinct. Having lost everything, these two Command Spells were the last memento he had, and his spirit screamed for him not to let go of them. Facing the fearful man, Sola continued speaking, as though soothing a resentful child.

"Don't you trust me? Although I have no Magic Crest, I am still a magus of the Sophia-Ri family; I, who am about to marry into the Archibald family; is it strange for me to carry out Lord El-Melloi's duty in his stead?"

"No, but ..."

Its logic resounded within him. Certainly, it would be hard for him to supervise Lancer's battles henceforth.

Now that things had turned out this way, he could not even protect himself. It would not be unlike the Einsberns to set an assassin or employ similar tactics against the Master; he might really lose his life this time. Sola ranked poorly as a magus against Kayneth. However, Waver had summoned Alexander, and the bloodthirsty murderer had formed a contract with Caster; their participation as Masters were completely out of the question, yet had still come to pass in this Holy Grail War. It was not entirely impossible, even for her, to win with sound battle tactics. Also, to control a Servant, Command Spells which bent their will to the Master's were indispensable. Still . . .

Kayneth remembered the sultry look on Sola's face when she gazed at Lancer at the hotel, late at night after the first battle. It was an intoxicated glance, like a dreamer's, something she had never shown her fiancé before. If she was merely fascinated by a handsome man, that would be excusable—just the small, problematic disposition of a woman. Her admiration toward men was not something he could do much about. Yet, Lancer was said to be no ordinary handsome guy.

"... Sola, do you think Lancer would turn from me and swear his allegiance to you?"

Sola nodded in reply to Kayneth, who had killed his reluctance and asked without any hesitation. "He is, after all, one who responded to the invitation of the Holy Grail. His heart seeks the Holy Grail with us. Even if his Master

was substituted, he would tolerate and accept it for the sake of his goal."

"That is ... wrong." Kayneth thought in his heart. Unbeknownst to Sola, Diarmuid Ua Dubhine was not such a commendable person. Certainly, those called by the Holy Grail as Servants would form any contract to participate in the Holy Grail War. Heroic Spirit or otherwise, they are expected to have a reason for seeking the Holy Grail. For the sake of those wishes they have charged to the Holy Grail, they submit to their Masters and head into battle together to receive the blessings of the Holy Grail.

For that reason, the Master faces his Servant and asks the Servant's wish—what he wished for in seeking the Holy Grail, why he had responded to the summons and appeared. As long as those reasons were not cleared up, the relationship would not work out. If, by some chance, their wishes were in conflict, he may go through a painful betrayal once the Holy Grail is acquired. Naturally, Kayneth had already asked Diarmuid about his wishes, as well as his actions-to-be if they procured the Holy Grail. Nevertheless, the Heroic Spirit did not answer.

No, that is not correct. Diarmuid did not refuse to reply; he denied the question itself. In other words, he was not seeking the Holy Grail. Repayment was unnecessary. To merely devote his loyalty to the summoner who was his Master in this life, to fulfil his honor as a knight: that was his only wish.

He could not fathom this. One with enough renown to be a Heroic Spirit would not abandon his pride and be the familiar of a human being without great reason. Yet, it was neither free service nor a prank. No matter how skilfully he questioned him, Lancer's answer remained stubbornly unchanged.

"If I can fulfill my honor as a knight, that would be good enough. I will cede the wishing machine, the Holy Grail, to the Master alone."

All this time, Lancer persistently refused the Holy Grail. In retrosepct, that may have been the moment he started to feel distrust toward his contracted Servant. It was impossible for a Servant not to seek the Holy Grail; Lancer's answer was an obvious lie. His true intentions were hidden.

That's fine as well, he thought. Kayneth still had the Command Spells. As long as he remained in possession of this absolute authority, Diarmuid's betrayal was impossible. Servants were just tools, no different from ordinary machines. Regardless of what their hearts contained, if they could carry out their functions perfectly, that was good enough. That was Kayneth's decision until yesterday night.

Nevertheless, before Sola who did not doubt Lancer at all, Kayneth could not be as tolerating as before. If he abided by Sola ... if he believed those words ... then unmistakably, he was driven by a wish different from the Holy Grail. He was a Heroic Spirit not to be trusted. After

all, that was the case in the stories of his legend. Was he not the treacherous subordinate who stole his lord's fiancé and fled . . . ?

"The Command Spells—I'm not handing them over." Kayneth declared plainly. "Command Spells and Magic Circuits are different systems of magecraft. I can still exercise it now. I . . . Right now, I am still Lancer's Master!"

Sola sighed deeply, and the gentle smile on her face vanished.

"Kayneth, you don't understand . . . We must win in any case."

Kruck—The dry sound of a twig being stepped on could be heard. Treating Kayneth's right hand gently earlier, Sola now casually twisted his little finger off. There was no pain, but the numbness multiplied Kayneth's fear. She could easily twist off the remaining fingers one by one without any resistance.

"Hey, Kayneth. At my level of spiritual healing, it would be impossible for me to forcibly extract your Command Spells. Only with the owner's consent can I remove *this* . . . without any resistance."

Her face was expressionless, and only her gentle voice remained unchanged. As if trying to persuade a dull-witted child, she continued calmly.

"If you refuse to give consent. . . my only resort is to cut off this right arm. How about that?"

In the darkness, at the rear entrance of the abandoned factory, the now-quiet thicket grew luxuriantly. Exposing herself to the cold night air, after waiting for the heat of her excitement to cool down, Sola called out to the shapeless sentry.

"Lancer, please come forth. I have something to say."

Complying to her call, the Heroic Spirit Diarmuid immediately materialized beside her. Under humbly downturned eyes, the love spot further emphasized his existence bewitchingly. His lightweight armor, which prioritized ease of movement, emphasized more strongly the fearlessness of his body, tense like a bird of prey. No matter how many times she had seen him, she still let out a sigh. The core of her body heated up.

"Is there anything abnormal outside?"

"Right now, this place is safe. Occasionally, there is a presence much like the loitering demons from Caster. But they do not seem to have sniffed this place out, and have not attacked. The boundary field set by Lord Kayneth has not fallen apart yet."

Nodding, Sola felt relieved inside. Lancer, on the lookout so seriously, could not have noticed the incident which had occurred inside the building.

"Right, Madam Sola. How is Lord Kayneth's condition?"

"Not good. I have applied the usual treatment, but ... although his arms are recovering slowly, his legs are probably beyond hope." With a gloomy expression, Sola

lowered her head. The scrupulous Heroic Spirit seemed to feel responsible for Kayneth's injury.

"If I had discerned the situation more carefully ... my Master would not have been forced to the point of death right under my nose."

"You were not aware of it. Kayneth reaps what he sows. He probably wanted to win this Holy Grail war too much."

"No, but ..."

At Lancer's hesitation, Sola hardened her resolve, and spoke her mind. "He is not appropriate to be your Master, Diarmuid."

Lancer, now silent, stared fixedly at Sola's face. Holding down her heart entranced by the stare, she lifted up the back of her right hand and showed it to Lancer. Distinctly etched onto were the two Command Spells which should have been on Kayneth's hand a while ago.

"Kayneth has renounced his fight and handed over his authority as a Master to me. From tonight, you are my Lancer."

Looking down in silence for a while, he shook his head like one under the employ of another.

"I have sworn loyalty to Lord Kayneth as a knight, Madam Sola. I cannot consent to that request."

"No way?!" Her expectations betrayed by such a response, she was now the one confused. "Was it not because of my prana that you are still a Servant in this

world? Now, I even have the Command Spells. I alone should be your genuine contractor!"

"Receiving your prana, and being bound by the Command Spells; they are not related at all." His eyes aimed downward apologetically, Lancer continued quietly. "Before I was Lancer, I was a knight. I can only devote my loyalty to one master. Madam Sola, please forgive me."

"... Am I not fit to be a Master, Diarmuid?"

"That is a different matter—"

"Look up at me when you speak!"

At her reprimand, Lancer reluctantly lifted his face, facing her directly. The eyes, brimming with tears, were not what he had expected. Moreover, his surprise was accompanied by a most unpleasant déjà vu. He had once faced a lady who pleaded with him in the same manner.

"... Lancer, fight with me. Protect me, support me, capture the Holy Grail with me."

"I cannot do that. If Lord Kayneth has renounced fighting, I cannot wish for the Holy Grail as well."

Greatly agitated, Sola almost blurted the words she could not hold back. Barely restraining herself, waiting for her throbbing heart to calm down, she continued in a stiff voice.

"Lancer, if you wish to persist in being Kayneth's knight, you have to strive even harder to win the Holy Grail. I have informed you of his condition. For that body to heal, the help of a miracle is absolutely necessary. Only the Holy Grail can provide that, is it not so?"

Lancer felt silent again. However, this time his silence was affirming and acquiescent.

"If you feel responsible for his injury, if you think of regaining Lord El-Melloi's dignity, if you do not proffer the Holy Grail to your Master ..."

"... Madam Sola, as Lord Kayneth's partner, you seek the Holy Grail only for Lord Kayneth. Is that right?"

"O-of course." At Lancer's quiet gaze, Sola gulped and replied.

"Will you please swear it? That you have no ulterior motives."

She would have burst into tears if she could, screaming in unladylike fashion and clinging onto this lovely man, expressing her heart's sentiment. But the haughty Heroic Spirit would refuse her point blank. She could not speak her heart, not now.

"—I swear. As Kayneth El-Melloi's wife, I will offer the Holy Grail to my husband."

Seeing her take the oath in a firm voice, Lancer finally relaxed and nodded quietly. Her expression was too faint to be regarded as a smile. Nevertheless, Sola was over the moon. At last, his expression toward her showed signs of a smile. It mattered not even if she had to lie ... Sola thought about her hidden desires again.

She would keep her relations with this man any way she could. No matter how despicable the lie, she would say it. She would not let anyone rebuke her for that. She would let none stand in her way. He was no human; he

was a spiritual being on a temporary visit from another world, a transient miracle brought forth by the Holy Grail. Yet, Sola's feelings did not change.

Recalling her past, she had frozen her heart ever since she reached the age of reasoning. Sola, born into a family of magecraft with a legitimate heir, had no room for feminine emotion in her upbringing. The blood of magecraft, continually refined generation after generation —her worth had been reduced to that. In other words, ever since her birth cry, she had no purpose other than arranged marriage. She felt no regret, harbored no questions; there was no leeway for her to choose. She willingly obeyed the agreed marriage arrangements decided by her parents. Her frozen soul did not lament honoring a husband she had no interest in for the rest of her life.

But things were different now. Never had she felt her heart throbbing so rapidly before. Sola-Ui Nuada-Re Sophia-Ri's heart was no longer frozen. She knew the warmth of a heart which was madly in love.

After Sola returned to her bedroom, Lancer remained outside alone, standing guard. For Servants, sleep was not necessary. As long as they had enough prana from their Masters, weariness had no effect on their body. Consequently, he had no way to forget his troubles in sleep. Recalling Sola's words again and again, Lancer let out a sigh. That look which abandoned everything and

pleaded with him wholeheartedly and pitifully, was too similar to the look of his "wife" in the past—Princess Gráinne, who had imposed the geis of betrayal on him; she, the perpetrator who caused him to fall from the position of a glorious hero to that of a refugee. Despite all this, Diarmuid never resented her.

Her decision to flee from the seat of Micuart's banquet, supported by no reason—save perhaps for captivation by the Mystic Face of the hero—nonetheless put her life at great risk. Her blood ties, royal pride, promised glory of the future—Turning her back on it all, Gráinne chose a path of love with Diarmuid. If the mystical force of his charm was its cause, the day would come when she would doubt her love. Still, with no fear of such a future, Gráinne lived her life of love. Diarmuid was dragged into that disaster—this was how others viewed it. He did not see it the same way. His own suffering paled in comparison to the ache he felt for his partner's. He never yielded to the weight of the geis which tested his pride. There was reluctance; there were struggles as well. He was distressed by his perversion toward the ruler, Fionn mac Cumhaill. But ultimately, he grew attached to the courage of Gráinne, this woman who believed in her feelings, and loved her to the end.

Naturally, their pathway of love was full of hardship. Driven by jealousy and resentment, Fionn mac Cumhaill mobilized all his forces to pursue the two who had taken flight, hunting them like wild beasts. While protecting the

princess, Diarmuid resolved not to cross weapons with his friends, the knights under Fionn. But he did not hesitate to bare his fangs at the foreign pursuers who were assembled through Fionn's pact with them. His fight with the giant Searban ... the nine Garbs ... Fionn's nanny, "Witch of the Millstone" ... Diarmuid found himself using his great valor, which surpassed all achievements established in the knight troupe, to formulate his flight with Princess Gráinne, again and again. For one known to others as the most noble subject of Fionn, this was too ironic an epic.

Loyalty? Love? Cutting up enemies with both lances, his heart was torn as well. Tormented by the dilemma of his contradictory loyalty and geis, his refined, twin lances pierced previous enemies, causing many meaningless deaths. A lady and two men—the sentiments and obstinacy of each party caused much bloodshed. At the end of the day, after all futile sacrifice, the heartbroken one was still Fionn. The old master acknowledged Diarmuid and Gráinne's marriage, bestowed him with a proper title and territory, and welcomed him as a subject again. It was a reconciliation Diarmuid had wished for ceaselessly, but it would be the harbinger of the conclusive catastrophe.

One day, Diarmuid, hunting together with Fionn, received a deep wound from a wild boar's fangs. It was a mortal wound, but he was not afraid; Fionn, the subject of countless records of miracles, was with him, and could

transform spring water scooped with his hands into a miracle drug. But before this subject who was on the verge of death, the only thing in the old master's mind was the bitter jealousy of the dispute for a woman. The well from whence the spring water flowed was only nine steps away from the collapsed Diarmuid. Fionn had only to walk nine steps to bring back the water; water spilled from his hands twice. The third time, Diarmuid's breathing stopped.

—Now, invited again as a Servant and looking back at his end during those bygone days, Diarmuid had no sense of regret at all. He had no intention of cursing anyone. He wanted to reply to his wife's love. He could understand Fionn's anger as well. But the twist of fate was simply too cruel. It was not just a life filled only with suffering and anguish. Each glass he drank with the king; the lovers' whispers; they remained irreplaceable memories. Though the end was tragic, Diarmuid was not dissatisfied. He, and the others around him, had earnestly lived their lives to the fullest. He did not deny the one life which had passed by him.

Still, supposing he became a knight again, picked up his spears, and lived another life ... An impossible miracle was born within the heart of the Heroic Spirit Diarmuid. His crushed former honor, his pride which could not be fulfilled—he would have a chance to pick it up again. That was all he wished for. A path of life with his long-cherished wishes, which did not come true in his previous life. This time, surely, his path of faithfulness ... With

undoubting loyalty, the honor of lifting up the victory to his Master . . .

Lancer had absolutely no wish toward the Holy Grail. Having received a Master for a second time, standing on the battlefield called Fuyuki, his wish was already half-achieved. The other half would be accomplished when he attained victory; when he brought the Holy Grail back to his Master, the fruits of his loyalty would take shape, and everything would be fulfilled. That was it; he was never supposed to wish beyond that. However, right now, Diarmuid's path started to grow ominous and cloudy. In this new age, his burdensome Mystic Face was trying to drive a wedge in again.

If Sola could come to the realization that she was only foolishly entranced by the Mystic Face, the worst case scenario could be avoided. Yet, if she became another Gráinne and clung to him, would he be able to shake off the woman's feelings? This was supposed to be a battle to compensate a tragic fate he did not want to repeat. How could he achieve it? Amidst the darkness of the still night, without a way to an answer, Lancer looked up at the moon in agony, helpless.

– 108:27:55

The roaring waves lapped against the shore. The ashen ray of light which illuminated the river bank overshadowed the light mist with white. The break of dawn was not far from the beach. The sandy beach extended endlessly left and right. The sea surface was enveloped in a white frost, and its bounds could not be seen. That masked landscape—was it a land opposite the shore? A faraway horizon? Or perhaps . . . nothing?

The restless roar of waves aside, all was silent. With no clouds on the sky and no winds on the land, any kind of human activity would be far from this shore. Onward, onward to the East, leaving every worldly thing in the West; and in such manner reaching the desolate, empty coast. Surely, on the other side of this mist, there was nothing. The world had not existed earlier, and an expedition was impossible. This place was . . . the sea at World's End.

Closing his eyes, he could hear the roar of the waves. It was permitted to none but he who reached World's End. The melody of the roaring sea grew distant—

—He had dozed off on the desk, his shoulders stiffened by the unnatural posture. Moaning in pain as one numbed, Waver lifted his face. He still had the sensation of seeing a somewhat strange dream: a dream he could see clearly, though he had no sense of himself; a dream through the peephole of someone else's memory. It was already dark; he must have wasted much time in that sleep.

He clucked his tongue at his own carelessness. Right now, nothing was more valuable than time.

Every Master was scrambling to deliver Caster's head on a platter. Whoever accomplished it the fastest would be rewarded with a Command Seal. He expected no one to let such an opportunity go to waste. For Waver, the runaway whose Servant was Alexander, the injunctive authority of the Command Seals was the last resort. He would not hand it over, whatever the circumstances.

A Servant of the Caster class—whoever the particular Heroic Spirit—would likely be a Servant with many tricks up his sleeves. To challenge him head-on without a prior formulated plan, one would require strong magic resistance skill, like a Heroic Spirit of the Saber class. Rider, a class not of the three knights, would have no choice but to face him with some strange strategy in hand. Realistically, he judged Alexander's magic resistance to be about D-rank. He had no choice but to do with that consoling amount of defense.

As such, the best way to take on Caster was to skillfully tempt Saber toward Caster with the false intention of combat, and then wait for one of them to drop out. However, the supplementary Command Seal he was striving for at great length would elude him. Proposing an alliance with Saber to hunt Caster down would be a poor plan. To gain the upper hand in the Holy Grail War, not outwitting the others here would be meaningless.

A whole day and night had passed after the announcement at Fuyuki Church. For the time being, he had directed Rider to investigate an idea which struck him. Intending to work out a

strategy, Waver stayed back at his house, but . . . in his distress, he had fallen asleep. That arrogant Servant would tease him sarcastically again. No; it would be great if he could get away with just ordinary sarcasm. Recalling the pain from the innumerable pokes at his forehead, Waver grasped his forehead reflexively. He hated the sensation. At this rate, his skull would crack.

While thinking on it, Waver heard brisk footsteps coming up the staircase, and froze. It was about time the old woman finished the dinner preparations and came up to call him. Right now, the things which could arouse suspicion were—not there, for now.

After a humble knock, the old woman's voice was heard, bearing a message Waver had not expected.

"Waver-chan, Alex-san has arrived."

"—Haa?"

Who? Before he could ask, a distressing hunch struck Waver's mind.

Alex . . . ALEX . . . ANDER?

How could this be? Just then, *Gahaha!* A hearty laugh boomed from the living room downstairs.

"*. . . Wait* a minute—!"

His expression changing, Waver bolted out of his room, half-tumbled down the stairs without so much as a glance at the dumbstruck old woman, and leaped into the dining kitchen where dinner was being prepared. The television was airing the nightly variety show. Glenn was there, enjoying the beer that was always served with the starter. A foreign object intruded the usual dinner scene.

Balancing his big frame dangerously on the guest chair, "Yo!" The Servant lifted his hand in relaxed fashion, and drained the beer-filled mug in two gulps.

"Wow! What a pleasant drink!"

Holding a bottle in his hand and advancing to the next one, Glen was completely delighted with his new drinking partner.

"... Our Waver as well. I had hoped that he would taste alcohol at least once after his return from England, but he still stomach it. I've been so bored until now!"

"Hahaha! That's because he doesn't know how to enjoy himself. 'Those who enjoy life are the winners.' Have been trying to tell him that."

—A friendly chat between the old man and the King of Conquerors. Faced with a spectacle too real to be a poor joke, Waver was speechless. Returning to the kitchen with a troubled look on her face, the woman tapped Waver on the shoulder.

"You can't do this! If you're bringing guests for dinner, you have to tell me earlier. Had I had known about this, I would have prepared a better feast. Geez!"

"... Err, eh ...?"

Smiling at Waver whose mind was somewhere else, Rider shook his head. "No, no Ma'am, please don't trouble yourself. Simple homely style is the best hospitality."

"Hmm. You are quite charming with your compliments." The laughing wife was now caught up in Rider's cheerful pace as well. Waver was the only one who had become unreadably still in this atmosphere.

"As you know, our Waver is that sort of temperamental person, isn't he? I can't help but to worry if he is getting along fine in his school in England. With someone dependable person like you as a good friend, my dear sir, it seems I have worried much over nothing!"

"No, no. He is the one who has been of help to me. These trousers were chosen and bought by him. They look great, don't they?"

While entrusted with other business, Waver found himself stuck stuck buying things for Rider, and had bought a pair of XL-size stonewashed jeans for him, which Rider now proudly showed off. How on earth the conversation between the two had worked out was still a mystery, but in any case, Waver was finally beginning to understand what type of person "Alex" was to the Mackenzie couple.

The old couple, still under the enchantment of magecraft, believed Waver to be their grandson, who was furthering his studies abroad in England. Rider was passed off as a friend whom Waver had met during his voyage, and he now boldly paid the Mackenzie residence a visit, settling down to a seat at the dinner table—thus the chain of events so far. He thought about how the old couple could believe Rider so easily. It was probably because of Rider's huge size.

"Alex, how long do you plan to stay in Japan?"

"Er, well. Until some minor business is settled . . . That should be close to a week."

"If it's all right with you, how about staying here? Unfortunately, we don't have a guest room available, but Waver's

room should be able to accommodate one more person on a futon. Right, Waver?"

"..."

"Futon ...? Ooh, the bedding material of this country! It would be great to enjoy it to the fullest!"

"Hahaha! Sleeping on the floor instead of a bed would feel strange while you are still getting used to it. Although we have been here for a long time, we were really surprised by it at the beginning!"

"That is the appeal of this foreign country, huh? The surprise of unknown things is lovely. No matter the era, Ay will always enjoy Asia!"

Although he had unintentionally belied his identity by his use of the archaic first-person pronoun, old man Glen nodded smilingly without the slightest hint of recognition.

"Come now, the meal is almost ready. Waver, please take your seat as well."

Urged by the old wife, Waver sat down dispirited on his chair. His seat, no matter how accustomed he was to it, felt uncomfortable tonight. The night's dinner was unexpectedly grandiose, taking on the form of a semi-feast, but Waver was silent from start to end. Sitting beside Rider, who was laughing heartily and unreservedly, he did not taste anything he put into his mouth.

After dinner, Rider went back to the room again, holding under his armpit a futon set borrowed from the landlord. Waver started off by questioning the Servant.

"What the heck are you doing?"

"What? I needed an excuse to enter the main door normally, right?"

"When you come in and out, *do so in spiritual form!* I have told you so many times!"

At Waver's tantrum and half-crying manner, Rider became disappointed instead.

"But I can't bring *this* in while in spiritual form . . ."

Saying that, the giant showed a small sports bag, brought into the room under the pretext of travelling hand luggage.

"I dunno what it is, but bringing this thing back is my duty for the day, isn't it? You even gave me these trousers for such a purpose. You were the one who gave me such an order, weren't you?"

"That's why I said . . . If you would just place that thing in front of the house secretly, I could go get it afterwards. That's all!"

"In that case, isn't it the same if I enter the main entrance openly and think of an excuse? No, that's not it; what the heck is this anyway?"

With an unsatisfied expression, Waver took the bag Rider held out and inspected its contents. There were altogether twenty-four test tubes sealed with stoppers. The containers were differentiated by handwritten alphabetical labels, and contained transparent, colourless liquid.

"Finally, I get to wear trousers. I wanted to stroll along some bright-lit areas . . . why did you want me, the King of Conquerors, to go to a country-like riverside to draw water anyway?"

"Because it's much more meaningful than munching rice crackers and watching television, that's why." Waver swiftly cleared the table and removed the whole set of experiment tools—one of the few valuable items he brought from his school dormitory in London. He then prepared the operation. Various vials into which ores and reagents were filled, spirit lamp mortar, droppers of all sorts . . . . At the sight of the apparatus lined up on the desk, the King of Conquerors frowned.

"What is this? You plan to start with some make-believe alchemy?"

"It's the real thing, not make-believe. Idiot." Replying disappointedly, Waver set up the test tubes Rider brought back in the tube rack according to the labels. He selected complementary reagents and mixed them together. This was something he had repeated many times in the Clock Tower; a basic task to him. As for the amount, he could not get it wrong even with his eyes closed.

"Just to be sure, you did not make any mistake with the places drawn on the map, did you?"

"Are you looking down on me, boy? What could possibly go wrong with something so easy?"

Grumbling, Rider tossed the folded map to Waver. It was a complete map of Fuyuki City. At approximately regular intervals, alphabets dotted the map alongside the Mion River from the river mouth upstream. The inscriptions on the map were marked with labels from the test tubes Rider brought back. The liquid contents were the water of the Mion River, retrieved from designated spots along its banks. Rider had demanded to go out in physical form,

and hence was ordered by Waver to collect the river water, with clothes bought by Waver as a condition of service. As expected, it turned out more fruitful than ordering him on a useless walk.

"... What am I doing?" Silently, he made progress on the preparation of the reagents. Feeling like he was back at the elementary department of Clock Tower, Waver was unhappy. He, who should be participating glamorously in the Holy Grail War as a Servant's Master, was here repeating such plain and boring work again. Letting out a melancholic sigh, he plugged the reagents which were fully mixed with a stopper. With that, he unplugged the stopper of the test tube labelled A, and put a drop of reagent in the center.

The instantaneous reaction exceeded his expectations. The water, which was supposed to be colorless and transparent, suddenly turned rust red in color.

"—t on earth is this?"

He thought Rider would surely start with the sequel of the video, but Rider was watching the experiment over Waver's shoulder with an engrossed expression. Although explaining was troublesome—a barrage of questions would intrude on his work even more—Waver did not ignore him, and answered.

"These are traces of the remains of the procedure. The remains of the magecraft in the water." Label A marked the position where the river mouth was the closest to the sea. At that location, such a reaction was evidently abnormal.

"Upstream of the river, but still considerably close to the river mouth. ... Who could have performed magecraft there? If we go upstream from here, we could probably find the location."

"... Boy, had you not realized from the start that the water of that river was mixed with such a thing?"

"No way! But it is a land with water flowing through the heart of the city. It is natural to start investigating from the water."

The easiest way to discover the whereabouts of magi is through the "Water" element. Water flows from a higher place to a lower place; this is an absolute principle. Compared to the effort needed to calculate the wind's direction or read the earth's pulse, finding the lowest flow of the water pulse is the least laborious. This is especially true for a land with rivers.

From the various methods of investigation, he had thought of picking the easiest one as a start, but it seemed he had already drawn a winner; luck was with him for now. B, C, D .... In that order, he deftly droppered the reagent into each test tube. The reaction grew increasingly stronger with each test tube nearer to the river mouth. At such remarkable conspicuousness, Waver's emotions bypassed wonder and went straight to utter shock. This could not be anything but someone setting up a workshop right in the middle of the river and discharging waste directly into it without any precaution whatsoever. Such a magus was worse than third-rate; a mere fool! He could not possibly exist—no, he exists. *That abject greenhorn!* The incident Waver heard about from the supervising Father at the church, to which he was summoned this morning, must be it.

"Still, to confirm it in such a manner ... I don't feel proud of this at all."

Exhausting one's ingenuity to outsmart the enemy, pitting wonders against each other—that was the "Magecraft Contest"

Waver had imagined. What he was doing now—progressing by carrying out underground investigation like a forensic investigator—was a method employed by people with no talent whatsoever. Though he already had positive results in his hands, what was left was the bad aftertaste of humiliation.

The reacting solution in test tube P had now turned to black ink. If it turned any murkier, this simple method could no longer be used for analysis. With an expectation of the outcome, he droppered the reagent into test tube Q. The water remained transparent. No matter how vigorously he shook it, there was no response.

Waver opened up the map again, and pointed at the P and Q scribblings. "Rider. Here, and here; what was in between them? Was there a draining trench? The mouth of an irrigation channel, perhaps?"

"Oh? There was something remarkably big there . . ."

"That's it! If we trace it back there, we will probably find Caster's workshop."

For some reason, Rider gazed at Waver closely with a solemn face.

"Oi, boy. Might you happen to be some great, excellent magus?"

The response was so utterly unexpected that Waver could not take it as anything but a cynical insult. Snorting, he turned away.

"This is not something great magi would do. It is the worst method among the worst. *You*—you're making fun of me, huh?"

"What are you talking about? Achieve good results using a poor method; isn't that a much greater achievement than starting from

better methods? You should be proud of yourself! As a Servant, I am proud as well." Laughing boldly, Rider clapped the diminutive Master on the shoulder. Increasingly upset, Waver tried to retort, but realizing the uselessness of preaching the mysteries of magecraft to this Servant, he held his silence and shrugged off the matter.

"All right! Now that we have the location, it is my turn! Hey boy, do you plan to strike at once?"

"Hey, wait! The enemy is Caster. Attacking immediately may be a little stupid."

The layout of a magus's workshop could be said to be the summation of the sorcery he had mastered within him. Consequently, capturing said workshop would mean possessing the equivalent power, skills, and all its resources—a head-on challenge. Servant Caster was known as the hero of sorcery; his class attribute, Territory Creation, was amplified. As long as he possessed the skill enabling him to create, in short order and under any condition, a superlative workshop, Caster could boast of being the strongest among the seven Servants in this battle. A reckless assault, such as a head-on bulldozing, would be equivalent to suicide even for Caster's natural enemy—Saber.

Such a standard of reasoning should be possessed even by Rider, but apparently the Servant was not so capable. Before he noticed, Rider had already materialized the Sword of Cypriot, sheathed it, and tapped Waver's shoulder while grinning broadly.

"Look. In a war, the camp's position changes every now and then. If you've grasped their position but fail to strike

immediately . . . If you let them slip past your fingers, it would be too late for regrets."

". . . Why are you so fired up again today?"

"Of course! My Master has finally shown some achievement which is likely to get us results. Bringing back the head of the enemy and repaying my master is my duty as a Servant."

Such amusing manner left Waver at a loss for an appropriate reply. As if taking that silence as consent, Rider laughed heartily, hit his Master's slender shoulder and nodded.

"Don't give up at such a beginning. For the time being, let's just try to strike them. We might pull this off unexpectedly!"

The former soldiers of the King of Conquerors, were they dragged to the east end of Asia in this manner as well? Waver could not help but sympathize with those ancient warriors.

– 106:08:19

—Somehow, they did it.

The sewer Waver discovered was indeed the haunt of inhuman things. Possessing countless tentacles, the innumerable aquatic monsters lay crowding in the narrow tunnel, waiting to strangle any pitiful trespasser to death. Naturally, at such a disgusting scene, Alexander, the King of Conquerors, had only one remedy.

"AaaaLaLaLaLaie!" The trampling rampage of Gordius Wheel • Wheel of Heaven's Authority in the sewer was like a lightning-clad excavator. Monster flesh and blood was ran down, trampled and scorched, filling the inside of the tunnel thickly like a fog. Waver, in the chariot with Rider, could not see his surroundings. Without the protection field that now covered them, he would surely be unable to breathe, suffocating from the blood of spawning demons. Still, the more he protected his breathing organs with magecraft shields, the more he had to supress his sense of smell; he would have fainted from the overbearing stench of intestines otherwise.

He thought they would be welcomed with some intricate and mysterious defense . . . but Caster's nest held nothing but an enormous number of familiars at sentry. It was devoid of magecraft disguises or traps. This could not be judged by magi standards—it was neither a workshop, nor anything of magi origin. It was just an ordinary siege used to fortify an army and strengthen their defence. Such defence, relying only on the number of cannon fodder, was unfit prey for a Servant furnished

with anti-army Noble Phantasms. This anticlimax served no resistance to Rider.

"Hey boy, you said we would be "attacking" the magus' workshop. Does such childish activity constitute that?"

"No . . . this is weird. Caster might not actually be a proper magus in this war."

"Aah? What d'ya mean by that?"

"If anecdotes of one's demon-summoning via grimoire possession were passed down as legends, though one were—contrary to expectations—not a magus, wouldn't one's magical ability be limited even if summoned as a Caster class servant?"

Shunning his body senses for a few minutes against the shrieks of the creatures being mowed down, Waver raised his voice undauntedly against the sounds of the clamorous massacre as he delivered that carefree analysis, though his nerves were numb. "Such a thrashing would be strange for an assault on a real worshop. A decent magus would never make such a blunder."

"Huuuh, so that's it? . . . Hmm? Are we about to reach the end?"

The wall of pulverized flesh which tried in vain to obstruct them now thinned before they realized it. Soon, the tentacles disappeared from sight. The chariot, released from the blood spray, sprang into an open area. As before, the surrounding was in pitch darkness, without even a ray of light. There was no airflow either, but the oppression they felt in that narrow, confined space earlier was gone.

"—Fuuun. Unfortunately, Caster's not around . . ."

A Servant would have no problems with vision even in such complete darkness. Rider coughed absent-mindedly. He had said that in a strangely low tone, probably from disappointment at letting the enemy escape, but Waver did not realize it.

"A water tank? Or what is it? Here . . ."

He would have liked some light, but if by any chance they were to come upon an ambush in this darkness, the light would betray their location. It would be great if he could enhance his vision with magecraft and see through this darkness.

". . . Aah, boy. I think it's better for you not to look."

Such frankness from Rider was rare. To Waver, it sounded like a lousy excuse for one who had something stuck in his teeth, and he was astonished.

"What are you talking about? If Caster is not here, we have to at least find some clue to his whereabouts!"

"That's probably true but, oh well. Boy, that guy is too much for you."

"Shut up!"

Suddenly serious, Waver jumped from the driver's seat of the chariot to the floor, and activated his night vision. Instantly, the fog of his field of vision cleared, and the spectacle which was earlier masked by darkness now came ito sight. Until this moment, he had forgotten the suppressed odor hanging in the sewer air, and was under the impresson that the splashing from his jump to the ground was the sound of sewage water.

". . . Wh-wha—"

Waver Velvet was a magus. He had steeled his heart for every type of mystery outside the bounds of his reason. He knew the

ritual he was now a participant in would involve murder of unparalleled brutality, and spared no sentiment for it. One who was unable to imagine piling dead bodies would have no hope of staying in this fight. Waver resolved never to be shaken, whatever the form of death that sprang into sight. Fuyuki was a battleground, and the sight of dead bodies was only natural. Even gathered in great numbers, even mutilated to an unrecognizable mess—ultimately, corpses were but corpses; Unpleasant goriness and atrocity, but not intolerable. He had thought so until this very instant.

To Waver's limited imagination, corpses were but remains of human bodies, the result of their destruction. The scene before his very eyes surpassed that completely. It was like a variety shop. There was furniture, clothes as well, musical instruments, cutlery, various items of unknownable use—probably just pictures or artwork. The creator's enthusiasm of the devotion creator, his diligence, and his profligate sense of fun could be perceived in those works. Unmistakeably, this craftsman loved the raw materials, as well as the manufacturing process. It was fathomable that people who revelled in violent pleasure do exist; the one who committed these murders could have been such a person. But the *things* in this blood-stained space were not corpses.

None of the things here were the remains of a human body. Everything was a new creation, an art. The existence, the worth, the bodies of human beings were discarded meaninglessly in the process of this art—such was the essence of the slaughter that took place here. Sheer murder—an act of creativity for one's own amusement. This creation of art through death was more than

Waver's mind could possibly take. It was beyond simple emotions like horror and disgust. At such graphically realistic and alarming shock, Waver could not even stand straight; he was already on his hands and knees on the bloodstained floor before he realized, regurgitating the contents of his stomach.

Rider descended from his chariot. Standing beside Waver, he sighed deeply.

"That's why, eh . . . I've asked you to stop, but . . ."

"Shut up!"

The gigantic Servant murmured, coughing in reply. In Waver's demoralized heart, the last bit of self-dignity had been scattered like fiery sparks. There was no reason or logic behind his intense outburst of fury. Kneeling here, his weakness was detestable. Revealing this weakness before his Servant—now, of all times—was a mortifying humiliation.

"Son of a bitch! . . . Treating me like an idiot! Dammit!"

"Now's not the time to throw a temper, idiot."

Rider spat that out with a sigh, and yet, for some reason, he was not amazed, nor did he reproach Waver. Instead, his voice could be heard in a quiet, admonishing tone.

"It's okay. That's all for now. If there is one who would not twitch an eyebrow at such a sight, I'll bash his face in. I praise your decision, boy. Your intention to bring Caster and his Master down first is true indeed. Now I see—every moment that such people are allowed to live is disgusting."

Waver could not be glad at Rider's commendation in honest fashion. He had targetted Caster for the reward of Command Spells offered by the supervisor. Obviously, such a thing had not

been told to Rider; there was no reason for a Servant to rejoice over a pointless increase in the Command Spells which bound them.

Rider's words to Waver bore no malice, but Waver strongly loathed that towering Servant. He did not adopt the respectful attitude Servants should have toward their Masters, and treated Waver like a fool instead. That was still forgiveable; what was unforgiveable was that despite his rare attempts to praise Waver, he still had such a mistaken understanding of Waver at such moments.

"What are you hitting me for?! Idiot! Are you just standing there, unconcerned?! Am I the only one who's ashamed?!"

Though in tears and vomiting heavily, he snapped at Rider with all his might. At such fury, Rider's mouth formed an upturned "v" shape in troubled fashion.

"This is not the time to humor my emotions. My Master's about to be killed."

"... Eh?"

Before Waver had time to even doubt his ears, Rider moved at lightning speed, throw the unsheathed Sword of Cypriot overhead, which gave off bright sparks in the empty space. Riding on ahead with raptor agility uncharacteristic of his size, he took a swift slash with the sword as it returned to him.

A wet sound of meat being ripped apart. A scream of agony and splatter of crimson red blood. Waver stared with utter disbelief at the black-clothed corpse which fell over. When on earth did he steal up behind Waver? For how long had Rider sensed that presence? Rider's sword had knocked off something

just then, something the shadow had thrown at him—a Dark dagger. With that throw, Rider was able to ascertain the exact position of the enemy. He was caught off-guard; the bloodstained water tank had already become a battlefield. The white skull mask, decapitated by Rider, stared bewilderedly at Waver.

"Assassin . . . It can't be . . ."

It was impossible—Waver had Assassin defeated and annihilated through the eyes of his familiar.

"Now's not the time to be shocked, boy." Rider quietly warned him, his sword readied. In confrontation, two more white skull masks appeared in the darkness.

"Wh-wh-wh-why?! . . . Why are there four Assassins?!"

"That's not the issue now." Rider was still composed despite the abnormal situation. No matter how fishy this course of events, only the situation at hand concerned him.

"There is but one conclusion to draw from this—those who thought *they* had died, have been deceived . . ."

Rider, now protecting Waver, was not shaken at all. The two Assassins mentally clucked their tongues regretfully at this realization. To them, this turn of events was a completely inexcusable fiasco. Of the Assassins deployed to observe Caster and his Master, two had been dispatched. There were still three left outside the workshop, watching them all this time—these three figures.

They had intended to steal into the workshop to investigate the place during Caster's opportune absence. Not knowing what was inside Caster's base, they had to do so with utmost caution. However, witnessing Rider's foolish frontal assault, the three had

decided it was a great chance. Secretly pursuing them from the opening in the defenses, they proceeded to find out the status of the workshop's defense, situation permitting. Rider had managed to reach the interior of the workshop without any trouble, and likewise the Assassins' penetration into Caster's base was unexpectedly obstruction-free. One of the Assassins, growing greedy from this unexpected turn of events, could not resist straying from duty at the sight of an extremely defenseless Master ahead of them.

Obviously, this would be a clear deviation from the instructions of their Master, Kirei. But if they could successfully eliminate Rider here, they would probably not be reprimanded. To the Assassins, it was an attractive situation. The three agreed upon an extreme gamble . . . which ended in superb failure. The two remaining Assassins discerned Rider's next move prudently, but cast questioning glances at each other. Should they resume their two-on-one battle against Rider here . . .? They both knew the answer. their chance at victory was gone when they lost the element of surprise. Visually assessing the difference in strength between them and Rider, they knew they had absolutely no chance of winning. Retreating to face Kirei's wrath, though a resentful option, would be much better than being slain here. In mutual understanding, both Assassins swiftly took on spiritual form and disappeared from Rider's sight.

"They . . . escaped?"

"No." Rider admonished Waver, who was feeling relieved.

"Although two had died, there are still two left. We don't know how many more Assassins would come forth. This is a bad place; favorable terrain for those guys. We should retreat immediately."

Without sheathing the sword, Rider hit Waver's chin, and pointed toward the chariot.

"Boy, get back to my chariot! Once we start off, the enemy would have no chance to strike."

"This place . . . should we leave it as it is?"

Pointing at the workshop which he dared not look at until now, Waver asked in a gloomy voice.

"Although we might learn something if we investigate further . . . Give it up! For the time being, we'll just wreck this place as much as we can. Who knows? It might upset Caster's plans."

His attitude unlike earlier, when he was trampling the demons outside the workshop, Rider was now more cautious. Although some part of him wanted to advance on the grotesque-looking demonic beasts with reckless abandon, the sneaky attempt by Assassin had probably made him felt quite seriously threatened.

"Are there any survivors . . .?"

Surveying the surroundings deliberately with a glance which penetrated the darkness, Rider shook his head with a bitter face.

"Some are still breathing, but . . . in their condition, death would be more merciful."

Waver was not brave enough to ask what Rider had seen in the darkness. They boarded the chariot, Rider took up the reins, and the raging bulls bellowed angrily, sending lightning in the darkness.

"Sorry about the cramped space, but there's something I'm counting on you for, Children of Zeus. Burn this place to ashes!"

At Rider's yell, the heavenly oxen stomped their hoofs, savagely circling the blood-stained workshop, as though drawing a "□" (Yen) character. Under the trampling of hoovess which scorched even the air, the only outcome was utter destruction. In the blink of an eye, the nightmarish handicrafts Caster and Ryuunosuke treasured so much were swept clean without any trace. In this fashion, the chariot circled two or three more times, leaving nothing but the heavy stench of burned fat in the water tank. Surveying the aftermath, Waver's expression remained gloomy. This did not solve the problem at all. The apprentice magus's heart squirmed. Rider grimly rubbed Waver's head with his big hands.

"With his base wrecked like this, Caster would have no place to hide even if he escaped. He just might come out staggering and confused. It wouldn't be too far-fetched to sing his requiem now, would it?"

"Wa-got it! Stop that!"

Exasperated by this humiliating treatment aimed at emphasizing his short stature, Waver's downcast expression faded. Laughing boldly, Rider pulled at the bridle, and they sped back to the sewer. It only took a short while to dash out of the narrow tunnel, above the surface of the Mion river. Savoring the clean, chilly air they had missed for so long, the relief finally calmed Waver's nerves.

"Oh my, what a stinky place that was. Tonight, I want a grand drink to get these feelings off my chest!"

"... Let me get this straight first. I won't accompany you in drinking."

Not that he would not; he could not. The strong odor of alcohol made Waver feel sick, even if he merely sat beside Rider as he drank.

"Hmph, I'm not even expecting a little chicken like you to accompany me! Aaaahhh, boring! Isn't there a river bank I can get myself happily drunk on? ... Oooh, that's it!"

Rider clapped his hands together knowingly. Waver had no idea what that meant, only a really bad feeling about it.

– 105:57:00

Tousaka Rin was prepared. The inheritor of a magi family, she was bound to a path different from that of ordinary girls. There was a very good example beside her: the greatest, most handsome, most gentle adult she ever knew. In her eyes, her father Tokiomi was a nearly perfect human. Although many girls her age also admired their fathers, Rin believed no other daughter would love her father as deeply as she did.

To become a singer or a beautiful bride when one grows up—girls her age harbored such wishes, but Rin's wish was different. Other occupations only came second on her list; her biggest wish was to be someone as great as her father: to walk the road her father was walking, to accept the destiny her father had accepted. In other words, to inherit and extend the Tousaka's magecraft blood.

But it was only a wish; it would not come true by the mere act of hoping. First, she had to obtain permission from the teacher—her father. She was rather anxious that her father had not yet expressed his wish to entrust the family to Rin in future. Perhaps her father had not acknowledged her aptitude for becoming a magus. Even so, her wish had never changed, and she was proud of her preparations to this end.

Of course, Rin knew far more about the situation in Fuyuki City than her classmates. Although she could not comprehend it as profoundly as her parents, she understood more than most ordinary people on the street. Seven magi, including her father,

were in the midst of a war. Fatal, unearthly threats lurked in the streets at night. Knowing these truths, Rin's heart felt a particular sense of responsibility.

Her friend Kotone had not come to school yesterday, nor today. The homeroom teacher said she was sick at home, but the rumor spreading through the class did not agree. Her parents did not want to deal with Rin when she called at her house. Child abductions were occurring in Fuyuki recently, and the simple investigations carried out by the police could not solve them. The police reports did nothing to bring the children back. Nobody realized what was going on—not the teachers at school, nor Kotone's family and friends—apart from Rin.

Kotone had trusted Rin very much. She always stood up for Kotone; she had done so when Kotone was bullied by boys in their class, and when the librarian forced work on her. Rin was proud of being so trusted and respected by her classmate. "Always remain elegant"—it was a good opportunity for Rin to put the family creed into action whenever she helped Kotone. Right now, Kotone must be waiting for Rin to save her.

She could have asked her magus father for help, but her father was one of the participants of the War and had not called back since he moved to the Miyama residence last month. Also, her mother had strictly ordered her not to disturb her father, in the same kind of tone with which she would have said "never go out at night." Rin had always obeyed her parents, but she could not leave a friend who was in a dangerous situation. And then . . . whatever the case, she would only have one sleepless night to go through.

Actually, Rin only knew part of the truth back then, and her mind was not yet mature. Unknown to her, she had been brought—by her sense of duty, or perhaps conscience—to a place she should never had stepped foot in. She did not realize it at the time.

Unlike the Tousaka house, tightly surrounded by bounded fields, it was all too easy to escape from her room in the Zenjou house. Climb out of the bedroom window, slide down the balcony pillar into the garden, then get outside the fence through the back door —it barely took five minutes, but the same route could not be used on her return. It was easy to slide down the balcony pillar, but too hard to climb back up. Knowing she could not hide the fact that she sneaked out tonight, and her parents were bound to scold her harshly, Rin reminded herself that it was not for a shameful purpose. She had to do this because she was of the Tousaka family. She would definitely bring Kotone back with her; no matter how her parents might scold her, she would be proud of herself.

She was armed with three things. The most trustworthy was the magecraft compass, a brithday gift from her father. It looked like an ordinary compass in shape and structure, but was not geomagnetic in nature. Instead, it indicated the direction whence strong amounts of prana emanated. In her experimentations, Rin found that neither wind nor water affected its detection of small prana movements. If something abnormal happened, this would undoubtedly be the most useful tool. The other two were crystal pieces Rin had specially crafted during her practice of jewel magecraft. They were the two best works of her collection. If all

the prana stored in them were to be released at once—although she had never tried something so dangerous—it would probably cause a small explosion. It would serve for self-defense in the face of danger. With this equipment and her own ability, Rin believed she could find Kotone and bring her back.

Will everything be all right? She nodded her head.

Will everything really *be all right?* She nodded hesitantly.

Are you really, really be certain that not a single mistake will be made? She did not dare to reply.

Actually, the question held little meaning for Rin. The first questions she would ask were whether Kotone would be all right, and whether she could manage if Kotone never came to school again. Posed with such questions, she would reply immediately and without doubt.

Gathering courage and pride, Rin reminded herself she was not like those normal frightened children. Chasing cowardice away, she walked toward the nearest cable car station. Fuyuki Shinto was only a station away, and she had just enough in change for the ticket.

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She missed the Fuyuki night air. The icy cold scent of winter was just the right thing to cool down her burning hot skin. Rin naïvely thought it would be great if she could find Kotone before the final cable car departed for the night. But that would leave her with only two hours, and that would not be enough time at all.

She would investigate Shinto first. In Miyama, the magecraft compass would simply point straight at the Tousaka house, and it was very likely her father would discover her if she went there. It was not yet midnight, but the people on the street were pitifully few. Normally, office workers would be rushing about as she was going home, and even at night lively groups of people still thronged on the street.

Opening the lid of the magecraft compass, Rin was dumbfolded by the reaction of the compass needle.

"... What's this?"

The needle, which normally wavered little, was spinning in circles rapidly. It was her first time seeing this kind of phenomenon. A shadow passed across Rin's heart, which now was like a confused little animal's. But standing there alone was not the best idea; the few adults walking by were looking at Rin questioningly. She started walking. The further she walked, the more sparse the streets became. Is this really the Fuyuki she was so used to? Rin felt a faint chill creeping up her body.

Actually, Fuyuki City had already imposed a curfew. Strange murders and abductions had been happening recently, and last night a series of explosions—likely the work of terrorists—had even occurred at Shinto and the harbor district. The police urged citizens to go out less often at night, and the smart ones obeyed. But even without the imposition of curfews, there would not be many citizens who like to wander at night. These days, something malevolent was lurking in the Shinto night; human instincts would have already detected this.

"Aaa, as I thought."

The red police klaxons lit up further down the street, and Rin hid in the shadow of a building in fright. The patrolling police car was creeping slowly, searching for citizens walking alone at night. The police would never leave her alone if they found her, and then she would not be able to save Kotone. As she watched the light leaving in the distance, Rin finally relaxed—

Clack. Rin swallowed the scream she almost yelled out. The sound came from the depth of the alleyway beside the house she was hiding next to; probably a stray cat sifting through rubbish and knocking over some cans, but it was hard to tell if someone was there. Rin drew a sharp breath when she looked down at the magecraft compass in her hands. Unmoving, as if frozen in place, the needle pointed toward the sound. Something was there; something that emanated unnatural amounts of prana.

Isn't this the result you waited anxiously for? Your investigation is bearing fruit. Isn't that a good start? Her plan was to check each suspicious spot in Shinto for Kotone's presence. Here, at the first location, she had found something. *Now, let's step into the alley and see what's there . . .*

"No!"

There might be some clues about Kotone there. Maybe Kotone herself is there!

"Absolutely not!"

There is no reason to hesitate. If you don't go, there would be no meaning in coming this far. You are not a coward. You would not abandon your friend. You are a Tousaka, of long and distinguished history. You have to prove your bravery and worthiness to be your great father's successor.

"No no no absolutely not no no no no noooooo . . .!"

A wet sound. *Splash, splash* . . . Something lurking deep inside the alley was breathing, as if sneering at her, creeping toward her. The realization finally struck Rin: this journey of exploration to rescue her best friend was definitely not going to be as easy as she thought. Kotone's figure was not there in the deep darkness. Even if she was there, she would not be the same Kotone she was before. If she was thinking of finding Kotone in the darkness of Shinto, she should have aimed to find Kotone's **** **** from the very beginning instead.

"No—!"

Tousaka Rin possessed excellent aptitude to be a magus. She had never seen a demon, nor had she been touched by one, but from mere instinct she could tell she was in a very dangerous situation right now. To study magecraft, one first needs to learn to accept and know death. This is the first lesson of every apprentice magus—that inescapable, incomprehensible, sheer despairing feeling of *death*. On that day, little Rin understood the essence of magecraft from that experience.

She could not move; she could not even yell. A terror unbearable for ordinary humans was more than enough to crush such a young girl. Strange buzzing sounds were perceived near her ears; she thought them triggered by the icy cold despair pressing down on her heart. Her thoughts were probably starting to destroy her sensory perception. A humming arose, monotonous yet maniacal, as if a swamp of giant wasps were ready to raid her . . .

The buzzing grew steadily louder. It was approaching her.

In the blink of an eye, the thing atop Rin's head rushed inward like a cover of black fog. Passing quickly above Rin like a turbid current, it struck the depth of the darkness in a split second. Then bloodcurdling screams without end, sounding like a cat boiled alive—but it was definitely not a cat.

Rin was already at the limit her endurance. Her sight dimmed, and her footsteps faltered. Right before she fell, someone took her in his hands. Before her eyes was a monster, only the left side of its face visible. In that face, ugly beyond description, was embedded a dim and lightless eyeball. But from his right eye emanated deep loneliness and melancholy.

I think I've seen this expression somewhere before . . . Rin thought right before she fell unconscious.

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An hour later, Tousaka Aoi finally found out about her daughter's disappearance. Afraid of her mother's scolding, the child had put a note beside her bed, which said she was going to find her lost classmate Kotone. Aoi was immediately overwhelmed with regret. Rin had mentioned Kotone during dinner, and questioned Aoi about Fuyuki's current situation. Back then, Aoi, thinking she should not hide anything about it, had said bluntly, "Forget this friend already."

Tokiomi should be informed—but this thought was immediately arrested by her conscience. Aoi knew nothing of magecraft, but she was a magus's wife after all. She knew very well that her husband had no time to worry about his daughter.

He was still at the battlefield, and had placed life and all stamina on the battle. The only one who could protect Rin now was her. Aoi ran out of the Zenjou house wearing her household garments, and raced onto the state highway at night in her car.

Not knowing where Rin had gone, she could only guess her range of movement, and check the places she might have been to. Starting at her house and taking the cable car, the first stop would be Fuyuki City in Shinto. Estimating a thirty-minute walk at a child's pace, the approximate distance would be . . . the first place in her mind was the public park beside the river.

The silent park easily brought to mind a graveyard. On the plaza, devoid of people, the dim light of the street lamps enriched the darkness and quietness with a sinister sheen. Fuyuki City's night air was markedly corrupted. Living with a magus, Aoi was used to numerous odd events, and she immediately felt this. At once, Aoi looked toward the bench she used to sit at when she brought Rin here to play; it was an instinct out of the blue. However, the little figure she was looking for was right there, clad in a red coat.

"Rin!"

Losing her composure, Aoi rushed forward with a yell. Rin was unconscious and lay unmoving on the bench. Aoi carried her, feeling her even breathing and warm body temperature. There did not seem to be any external wounds, and she was soundly asleep. Aoi finally released tears of reassurance.

"Thank goodness . . . truly . . ."

Whom should she thank? Aoi, filled with joy, finally calmed down. She suddenly realized that someone was looking at her.

Turning her head, she noticed someone was looking at them from the bushes behind the bench.

"Who's there?" Aoi yelled with a stiff tone. Contrary to her expectations, the figure moved to stand beneath the light of the street lamps without hesitation. It was a man wearing a large winter coat, with a scarf wrapped around his face. His left leg seemed to be wounded; it scuffed as he walked.

"I thought I would definitely see you if I waited here."

The mysterious man finally opened his mouth and gasped. He seemed to be a terminal lung cancer patient, each breath taken painfully, heaved in heavy huffs. However, his tone was surprisingly elegant and soft. Despite his ruined throat, Aoi found the voice familiar.

"... Kariya ..."

The figure stopped. With temporary hesitation, he finally took off the scarf and showed his face. The withering white hair lifeless, the left side of his face frozen and expressionless, it was a very terrifying face. Aoi tried to restrain her cowardly wails, and failed. Kariya laughed deplorably with the remaining right side of his face.

"This is the magecraft of Matou. It requires the offering of my flesh, the corroding of my life ... thaumaturgy that can only be achieved at this price."

"What? What's going on? Why are you here?"

Slightly confused, Aoi asked her childhood sweetheart without pause. But Kariya answered no questions, continuing his earlier topic with a gentle tone.

"But, Sakura-chan is fine. Before she turns out like this as well . . . I must save her and get her out."

"Sakura—" The forbidden word the Tousaka family had not mentioned for a year. The uncontrollable pain of separation suddenly flooded Aoi's heart. Sakura—the Tousaka daughter sent to the Matou family . . . Was it not a year ago when Kariya saw Aoi last?

"All Zouken wants is the Holy Grail. He promised me he'd release Sakura as long as I help him to attain the Holy Grail."

The Holy Grail Kariya spoke of brought an evil chill to Aoi. She prayed her ears were mistaken, but Kariya stretched out his right hand, extinguishing her prayer. On the back of his hand, three engraved Command Seals could be seen clearly.

"Therefore, I'll definitely do it. . . . Don't worry, my Servant is the strongest; he will not lose to anyone."

"Ah—why—"

Terror, sadness, and immense confusion had rendered her speechless. Kariya had returned to the Matou family, to lead his Servant in Heaven's Feel. This meant her husband and her childhood sweetheart were about to participate in extraordinary gruesome slaughter against each other.

". . . Oh God . . ."

Kariya did not hear Aoi's lament; he had misinterpreted the tears seeping from her eyes.

"Right now, Sakura does not even want to hope. So . . . you must take that child's place. Aoi, you need to believe instead, to pray in her place. Pray for my victory and Sakura's future."

The left eye, hollow as the dead, glared at Aoi as though cursing her. The right eye, belonging to her gentle old friend, gazed at Aoi as though begging her.

"Kariya, do you . . ."

Want to die? Want to kill Tokiomi and die? Aoi could not ask that. Despair rooted itself deeply in her heart. She lowered her head and held Rin tightly to her chest. It was the only thing she could do right now to escape this cruel reality. Her eyes were clenched shut, but Kariya's gentle, agonized voice was beside her ears.

"One day, we'd come here to play like before. Rin-chan and Sakura-chan would return to being a pair of good sisters like before . . . so don't cry anymore, Aoi."

"Kariya, wait—"

But Kariya did not respond. He walked slowly away, dragging his destroyed left leg. She had not the courage to follow him. Right now, she could only cry alone with her daughter in her arms. Motherly tears fell on Rin's sweetly sleeping face.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

In the darkness, a few Assassins traversed in silence, moving to report everything they've gathered to Kirei.

"Is it appropriate to just leave Tousaka Tokiomi's daughter like this?"

"No problem. Just go tail Berserker's Master."

"Yes."

Although they took on this job, none of the Assassins could figure out what good this kind of surveillance would do for the Holy Grail War. Since yesterday, more strange requirements had cropped up in Master Kirei's commands. He asked the Assassins who spied on the five enemy Masters to carefully observe the Masters' private lives, interests, and appearances, and to report them. The density of the Assassins' surveillance scattered around Fuyuki was to be raised. Right now, in the darkness of the night, there were Hassans hiding everywhere, obeying their Master's command.

It was a command; they would obey. Though bothersome, it was not of particular difficulty; they had nothing to complain about. The Assassins disappeared in the thickness of night, tailing Matou Kariya.

– 103:11:39

Night descended once again on the Einsbern forest. It was pitch dark and serene, but the scattered signs of battle were still evidently visible. The castle, specially tidied by maids she had brought from her own country, was severely damaged in the battle between Emiya Kiritsugu and Lord El-Melloi. The maids had returned to their country; it could not be fixed even if she so wished. Irisviel sighed as she traversed the corridors, doing her best to ignore the ruinous scene.

Fortunately, a few bedrooms had been spared. Hisau Maiya now rested in one of them. Irisviel had already performed healing magecraft on her, but the Einsbern healing magecraft is, after all, a large burden for the wounded. It was adopted from alchemy, and did not cause the injured body to regenerate, instead using magecraft to create new tissue for grafting. That was all she could do for now. It would have been a small matter dealing with a homunculus patient, but working with human patients was a major operation akin to an organ transplant in modern medicine.

Exhausted, Maiya was in deep sleep. It would take a long time for her to regain consciousness and move her body. Thinking of how Saber was protecting her, she felt worse for Maiya, who was heavily wounded. But she was of great importance in Heaven's Feel after all, and would undoubtedly be prioritised. It was undeniable fact. Her apologetic feelings for her wounded friend were naïve sentimentality.

Meanwhile, Kiritsugu had left immediately after sending the injured Maiya back, and had not returned since. He did not even tell Irisviel and Saber his destination; he might have left to chase Kayneth El-Melloi, who had escaped. Irisviel already knew the enemy magus had not been killed because of Saber's intervention. Kiritsugu neither raged at or blamed Saber, but had left coldly, without her. It was hard to tell if he did it to avoid wounding her pride, but the gulf between them was growing ever wider, and reconciling them was already difficult.

Troubled by the relationship between her husband and the King of Knights, Irisviel sighed deeply. Suddenly, a thunderous roar was at her ears. This roar that tore the night was a gigantic burden for her Magic Circuits; she almost fainted from dizziness in the colonnade.

It was nearby, and the prana impact that followed meant the bounded field in the forest outside the castle was already under attack. Although a bounded field was not easily destroyed, her magecraft had already been damaged.

"What's going on? . . . A frontal charge?"

A pair of strong arms supported Irisviel's shoulders; they were Saber's arms, who immediately appeared beside her when this strange change occurred.

"Are you all right, Irisviel?"

"Yeah, just scared. I did not think such a rude guest would visit."

"I'll go out to greet him. Stay beside me."

Irisviel nodded. Saber was going out to meet the attack, which meant she would have to face the enemy as well. But the

battlefield was the safest place for Irisviel, because the strongest Servant was right beside her. Quickening her steps, Irisviel followed Saber. The two ran through the tragically ruined castle; their destination was the terrace outside of the door. The opponent was attacking from the front, and they should be able to meet him there.

"The thunder just then, and this senseless tactic . . . the opponent must be Rider."

"I agree."

Irisviel remembered the overwhelming power of the Noble Phantasm, Gordius Wheel, which she had witnessed a few days ago at the warehouse street. The chariot, entwined with thunder and pulled by divine beasts—if such an anti-army Noble Phantasm were to release all of its power, it could easily destroy the magecraft focal points placed in the forest. It would not matter much if the bounded field was fully charged, but it had yet to recover from Caster's and Kayneth's attacks a few days ago.

"Oi, King of Knights! I came just to meet you. Would you come out, aye?"

The sound came from the main hall; the other party had already entered. Without a doubt, the enemy was the King of Conquerors, Alexander. His powerful and reverberating call was not in the tone of one about to fight, but Saber dared not to be slack; she materialized her silver armor as she ran. Finally passing the corridors and reaching the terrace, when Irisviel and Saber saw, by the moonlight shining through the skylight, the enemy Servant standing in the hall with his chest puffed out, they were at a loss for words.

"Yo, Saber. Hearing about the castle here, I decided to have a look. What happened to it, aye?"

Not apologetic in the slightest, Rider smiled a teeth-baring grin. Then he flexed his neck, pretending to be serious.

"It's difficult to get in and out of the house if you have too many trees in the garden. I almost got lost before I arrived at the door, so I cut some down for you. The view is now much better thanks to my efforts."

"Rider, you . . ."

Saber said severely, but against this enemy who rendered all opponents speechless, she was likewise at a loss for words. It was Rider who furrowed his brows in surprise and said:

"Oi King of Knights, aren't you gonna wear something modern tonight? Don't just stick to that old-fashioned armor."

If Saber's armor-clad form was regarded as old-fashioned, how would Rider's attire of jeans and T-shirt be judged? The armor was Saber's pride, though the cracks on the thick breastplate hinting at its weaknesses. Perhaps the only thing to be said here is 'the ignorant are irrefutable.'

Waver half-hid behind Rider's giant torso and looked up at Irisviel. It was hard to tell if his expression was one of enmity or terror. Undoubtedly, his face plainly showed he wanted to go home, and quickly.

A long time ago, King Alexander took the lead in wearing Asian clothing, out of interest in the cultures of his conquered lands, which caused his followers to avoid him like the plague. Irisviel had heard of this story, but she could never have known that Rider's inspiration for changing into modern attire was Saber

and the suit she wore. What further confused them was the thing in Rider's hand; it was no weapon, nothing that seemed to be of use in battle. It was a casket, a red wooden wine casket. Rider, who easily carried the casket under his arm, looked like a wine seller delivering his stock.

"You . . ."

Saber, once again at a loss for words, took a deep breath and said calmly.

"Rider, what are you doing here?"

"You can't tell by looking? I'm gonna drink with you—oi, stop standing there like a stick and lead the way. Isn't there a courtyard here fitting for a banquet? This castle won't do, it's way too dusty."

Saber sighed helplessly, and the pent-up anger in her chest dissipated. Faced with an opponent who appeared to harbor no ill-intent, she found it impossible to sustain her fighting spirit.

"Irisviel, what do we do?"

Irisviel was similarly befuddled. She was indignant at the destruction of the bounded field, but likewise could not sustain that indignation at the sight of his grinning face.

"He's not the kind of person who'd set a trap. Perhaps he really just wants to drink?"

Rider once said he would obey the contract sealed by the Heroic Spirits' pride and honor, and pronounce his challenge only after Saber and Lancer had decided the victor among them. Therefore, his sudden appearance tonight was truly incomprehensible.

"Could that man be trying to placate Saber?"

"No. This is a challenge." Saber, her fighting spirit supposedly deflated, suddenly became solemn for no reason.

"Challenge?"

"Yes. We are kings both. If the drinking table can decide a victor, this would be a battle without bloodshed."

Hearing Saber's words, the King of Conquerors nodded with a smile.

"Hohoho, it is good that you understand. Since we can't fight with swords, let us battle with wine. King of Knights, I will not go easy on you tonight. Prepare yourself."

"Fascinating. I accept."

Saber, resolute in reply, was already on the battlefield, stout with vigor. Only then did Irisviel realize this was not a joke, but a true battle.

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The banquet was to be held at the parterre in the castle's central courtyard. Last night's battle had left the place intact, and it would not be frugal to welcome a guest here. By now, none paid heed to the outside chill.

Rider brought the casket to the central courtyard, and the two Servants sat opposite each other in ease. Irisviel and Waver sat aside, next to each other. Attempting to guess the progression of events, they realized they were in a temporary truce; all that was required of them was to stay aside and watch.

Rider shattered the lid of the casket with his fist. The musky fragrance of rice wine quickly filled the air of the courtyard.

"Although of odd shape, this is the goblet unique to this country."

Rider happily scooped up wine with the long bamboo ladle, but none present pointed out the error in his common sense. He drained the wine in the ladle with one gulp, and spoke:

"I heard that only those who are worthy are able to obtain the Holy Grail."

The solemn tone silenced the atmosphere. Something must be up if this man was speaking in such a tone.

"The ceremony for choosing the worthy one is this battle conducted at Fuyuki. However, as onlookers, we will not need bloodshed. If we Heroic Spirits can mutually acknowledge each other's strength . . . need I say more?"

Without hesitation, Saber took the long ladle passed by Rider and scooped up a full measure of wine. her slender figure made onlookers worry if she could hold her liquor, but her directness lacked in no measure against Rider's. Seeing this, Rider praised her.

"So, are you going to compete with me to see who's stronger, Rider?"

"Exactly. This will be a true competition in the name of kingship. But we can't call this 'the War of the Holy Grail'; better to call it 'Quiz of the Holy Grail'. Between the King of Knights and the King of Conquerors, who would be 'the King of the Holy Grail'? It is most fitting to ask the wine goblet such a question."

Rider, his previously solemn tone now reversed, laughed like a prankster. Then he spoke as if to himself.

"Ah, speaking of kings, here is another who calls himself king."

"The joke stops here, cur."

In response to Rider's words, a blinding golden light flashed before all present. The sound and light made Saber and Irisviel tense up.

"Archer . . . Why are you here?" Saber demanded angrily, but it was Rider who replied impassively.

"Ah, I had invited him when I saw him on the streets. But you sure are late, Goldy. Unlike me, he did walk here, so it's not entirely his fault."

Archer, in full armor, glared haughtily at Rider with burning ruby eyes.

"Trust you to pick such a cruddy place for a banquet; this is as much taste as you will ever have. How will you repay the sin of summoning me here?"

"Don't say that. Come, have a drink first."

Laughing heartily, Rider passed the wine-filled ladle to Archer. Contrary to expectations of his anger at Rider's attitude, he took the ladle and downed it in one gulp.

Irisviel remembered the challenge Saber spoke of before. Archer—the anonymous golden Heroic Spirit called himself king, and so could not refuse Rider's wine.

"What kind of cheap wine is this? How could such wine to conduct a fight between heroes?" Repulsion was written all over Archer's face.

"Really? I bought it from the market here; it's pretty fine wine."

"You only think so because you don't know anything about wine, you cur." Archer dismissed the wine derisively, and ripples appeared in the empty air beside him; ripples that harbinged a strange phenomenon which could summon Noble Phantasms. Waver and Irisviel both felt a chill run down their spines. But what appeared tonight were not weapons; it was a set of wine bottles encrusted with sparkling gems, colorless lucid bottles of heavy gold nectar.

"Behold! This is what the king's wine should be."

"Oh. Many thanks." Not minding Archer's tone at all, Rider happily poured the new wine into three cups. Saber was still cautious against Archer, whose identity she still did not know. She looked at the wine in the golden bottle hesitantly, but took the cup passed to her.

"Wow, delicious!" Rider took a small sip, and immediately complimented it with wide open eyes. This time, even Saber's curiosity was raised. This was not a contest of manner, but a competition undertaken with wine. As the wine flowed down her throat, all Saber felt was a strong swelling sensation in her head. It was indeed wine like she had never tasted before. Fiery and clear, mellow and invigorating, the pungent fragrance filled her nose, and her whole body floated.

"Fabulous. This is definitely not wine brewed by humans; is this the drink of gods?"

Looking at Rider, who lavished his praises, Archer smile with leisure. He was already sitting down, twirling the cup in his hand satisfactorily.

"Of course. Be it wines or swords, only the best are stored in my treasury. It seems my grade as a king has already been decided."

"Cease your jokes, Archer." Saber roared. The silence was broken by a tense and intimidating atmosphere.

"This bragging about your wine collection tires me. Such behaviour is unlike a king, and more befitting a jester."

Archer sneered as he looked at Saber, who was all worked up. "How unmannerly. One who does not know wine is not fit to be king at all."

"Enough. You two are so tiresome." Rider smiled helplessly and signaled at Saber, who was not done yet, to be quiet. Then he turned and continued.

"Archer, this greatest of wines you have summoned deserves to be vesseled only in that most prized of all goblets—unfortunately, the Holy Grail was not made for wine. Now, we are going to have a quiz of the Holy Grail to determine if one among us is indeed worthy to have the Holy Grail. First, you are to tell us why you seek the Grail. Archer, as a king, try to convince us that you and no one else are the one worthy of attaining the Grail."

"You are such a pest. You assert that we are to compete for the Holy Grail. I'm afraid that is too far removed from this premise."

"Huh?" Rider's brows lifted in confusion and surprise, and Archer sighed in resignation.

"It is something that should be in my possession to begin with. All treasures in the world originate from my collection. The long passage of time has taken from my treasury, but given no cause for doubt of its ownership."

"So you're saying you once had the Holy Grail? You know what it is?"

"No." Archer evenly negated Rider's question. "It is not something you can understand. The sum of my wealth exceeded my own knowing, but as long as it is a treasure, it obviously belongs to me. You should have more sense than to rob me of it."

Now it was Saber who was speechless.

"Your speech is not too different from Caster's; he's not the only demented Servant, it seems."

"Oi, what's with those words?"

Unlike Saber, Rider mumbled as if supporting the situation. Unknown to others, he had picked up the bottle again and filled his cup without care. "I think I know your true name now. There can be only one other who's even haughtier than Alexander."

Irisviel and Waver focused immediately on his words, but Rider changed the topic.

"Then, Archer, you are saying that we can obtain the Holy Grail if you agree to it?"

"Of course, but I have no reason to reward rodents like you."

"Perhaps you cannot afford it?"

"Of course not. I reward only my subjects and my people." Archer smiled mockingly toward Rider. "Rider, if you would become my subject, I would not mind granting you a cup or two."

"... Ah, now that would be impossible." Rider scratched his jaw, seemingly finding his opponent's conditions too unreachable, and decisively turned his head. "But Archer, you don't actually care if you have the Grail, do you? You don't seem to be competing for the Grail for the fulfillment of some wish."

"Of course. But I cannot let off those who rob my treasures; this is a matter of principle."

"That is to say—" Rider drained the wine in his cup. "That is to say what? Is there some cause or reason?"

"It's the law." Archer replied immediately. "The law I set down as the king."

"Hm." Rider, in seeming comprehension of his words, took a deep sigh. "Such a perfect king, able to abide by the laws he set down himself. However, I still want the Holy Grail very much. My way is that if I want something, I'll take it by force; because I, Alexander, am the King of Conquerors."

"Not at all. If you invade, I'll punish; there is no room for negotiation."

"Then we can only meet on the battlefield."

With a solemn face, Archer nodded at the same time with Rider.

"But Archer, let us drink first and leave the business of battle for later."

"Sure, unless you don't think much of the wine I brought."

"Nonsense! How could I bear not to drink such fine liquor?"

At this moment, Saber could no longer tell if Archer and Rider were friends or foe; she merely sat aside, looking at the two. In a short while, she found her voice again.

"King of Conquerors, as you have already acknowledged that the Holy Grail is owned by someone else, will you still take it by force?"

"Huh? Obviously. Conquest is my belief—that is, 'taking' and 'invading'."

Suppressing the anger in her heart, Saber pushed on: "Then why do you want the Holy Grail?"

Unexpectedly, Rider smiled rather shyly. He replied after a sip of wine: "I want to be human."

It was such an unexpected answer. Even Waver yelled out, screaming hysterically, "Owww, you! You still want to conquer this world—*Waaaa—!*"

Silencing his Master with a finger flick, Rider shrugged his shoulders. "Idiot, how can I conquer the world in a single lifetime? Conquest is my dream, and I can only bequest this first step to the Holy Grail."

"Mongrel . . . are you challenging me with such a silly wish?"

Even Archer was helpless at this, but Rider grew more somber and continued: "Say, even as we appear in this time by the blessings of prana, we are ultimately still Servants. We do not exist in this world—it feels slightly ridiculous. Are you really satisfied with just that? I am not. I want to be reincarnated into this world, and live as a human."

Waver thought Rider's stubbornness in refusing to enter spiritual form, insisting on staying in physical form, was an odd habit. Indeed, though Servants can talk, dress, and eat like humans, they were in essence not far from ghosts.

"Why . . . do you want a body so much?"

"Because that is the cornerstone of conquest." Alexander muttered as he stared at his own clenched fist. "Possessing a body, marching out toward the ends of the earth, carrying out my conquest—that is my way of kingship. Right now I lack a body;

that will not do. Without a body, nothing can start anew. I fear few things, but I must have a body of flesh and bone."

Archer silently sipped his wine throughout, as if lending a diligent ear to Rider's words. On closer inspection, one would find a strange expression on his face, different from his usual ones. Calling it a smile would be far-fetched. Compared to his usual sneer, it had a particularly sinister undertone.

"I have made up my mind. Rider, I will kill you with my own hands."

"Hahaha, saying such things even now. You'd better be prepared early as well. The Grail aside, I plan to plunder your treasury as well. Letting the King of Conquerors taste such delicious wine is really thoughtless of you."

Rider roared with brutal laughter. But there was one person here at this banquet who had not shown a sliver of a smile yet. Saber, sitting at the banquet, did not find a juncture to join Archer and Rider in their conversation. The way of kingship these two discussed was far removed from her own beliefs, and there were few topics on which she was in common agreement with the two.

Acting only according to your own will—this was not the way a king should think. For Saber, who believed in uprightness, Archer and Rider were sheer tyrants. No matter how mighty the opponent, that unwavering battle vigor will continue to burn inside Saber's heart. These two were enemies she could not lose to. She must never let the Grail fall into their hands. Archer's words were senseless, and Rider's wish can only be regarded as the wish of a fighter. Moreover, it was just the beginning of all the

desires of men. Compared to their wishes, her own wish was much nobler.

"Oi, say, Saber, talk about your wish too."

Rider finally turned to Saber. The wish in her heart never wavered at all. *My way of kingship is my pride.* Her head held high, the King of Knights said, looking straight at the other two Heroic Spirits.

"I want to save my homeland. I will change England's fate of destruction."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"How could they be drinking together . . .?" Tousaka Tokiomi, sitting alone in his underground workshop, once again sighed at Rider's odd behavior.

"Is it really all right to leave Archer alone?" The magecraft communicator carried Kotomine Kirei's stiff voice. Tokiomi laughed bitterly.

"It can't be helped."

"It is a meeting between kings. How could he ignore those questions directed at himself?"

It would be fine as long as they did not figure out the Gilgamesh's true power. Luckily, all that transpired tonight was a fight on the drinking table. As long as no swords were drawn, Archer would not reveal his Gate of Babylon. Tokiomi's clear knowledge of the events at the distant Einsbern headquarters while he sat in his own workshop was the result of reports from the Assassin hiding there, who passed the information on via

Kirei. After Rider had destroyed the bounded field in the forest, Assassin successfully infiltrated the castle while concealing his presence.

Heaven's Feel was already in its fourth night, and Tokiomi had not taken one step out of his house in Miyama. For days, he had stayed in his own house, gathering information about the situation outside. He had also investigated all he needed to know about the few Masters who were currently in hiding.

At this moment, his primary concerns were the King of Conquerors, Alexander, and his Master, Waver Velvet. These two had yet to fight the other Servants. Tokiomi knew precious little about them. Worse, Assassin's mistake had exposed to them the fact that Kotomine Kirei and Assassin were still alive. Therefore, Kirei specifically warned Assassin to not go near Rider unless necessary. But even Presence Concealment had its limits. Despite his careless demeanor, Rider's perception was sharper than other Servants. For this assignment, Kirei told Assassin again to be careful not to be discovered by Rider.

"Right, Kirei. The difference in battle strength between Rider and Archer; what do you think of it?"

"I think the key lies in whether Rider has a trump card even more powerful than 'Gordius Wheel'."

"Hmm . . ."

That was the problem. Of the five remaining Servants, Rider made Tokiomi and Kirei most restless. The Master controlling Berserker had spent a huge amount of energy, while Caster was surrounded on all sides and had his workshop destroyed. Those two would die out on their own. Gilgamesh would not lose to a

wounded Saber. Although Lancer remained unscathed, his original Master had retired from the War due to his severe injuries—a Lancer controlled by an inferior magus was no threat at all. Apart from Rider, the other four groups needed no further surveillance by Assassin.

"... Right now, we need to try that plan."

"I see. I understand."

Without needing Tokiomi to voice it, Kirei, at the other end of the communicator, already understood his intentions. To obtain precious information, they could send Assassin to test it out. Right now, Rider and his Master were defenseless at a banquet. It was a great opportunity for a surprise assault. Victory did not matter for now; it was more important to gauge the difference in battle strength between the enemy and their side. Of course, it would be ideal if Rider could be smoothly disposed of. If not, it would be good enough to force him into desperation, and get him to use his most powerful ultimate weapon.

"It would take about ten minutes to gather all the Assassins together."

"Good. Give the command. This is a big gamble, but we have the silver lining of minimal loss even if we fail."

For Tokiomi, Assassin was just a means to the Holy Grail, a prop to be thrown away after use. This understanding was fully reflected by his pupil, Kotomine Kirei. Done with his orders, Tokiomi changed his sitting pose and poured more tea into his cup. He sniffed delightfully at the fragrance of the red tea, and awaited the result of the new plan.

– 102:54:10

As Saber finished her sentence dramatically, everyone lapsed into silence. Saber herself was most confused. An awkward silence filled the room. This made no sense. Though she spoke with great emphasis, none in the room were the kind to be easily cowed by talk.

It was plain and clear, with no room for doubt. That was her way of kingship. There was nothing surprising about it. What was surprising was that no one voiced dissent or agreement—when that would be the obvious response.

"Hey King of Knights, I might have heard you wrongly, but . . .?" Rider finally broke the silence, his face plainly confused. "Did you say you want to change fate? That means you want to reverse history?"

"That's right. Even if the wish is something that cannot be granted through a miracle, if the Holy Grail is truly omnipotent, surely . . ." Saber answered haughtily. Now she understood why the atmosphere between the two kings was so special. The situation had cooled immediately.

"Errr, Saber? I'd like to confirm this. . . . The destruction of that Britain happened in your time, right? During your reign?"

"Yes! That is why I cannot forgive myself." Saber answered, her tone ever firmer. "That is why I cannot let things be that way. The destruction of my country was my fault, and I wish to reverse it."

Suddenly, someone laughed out loud. The laughter was a base, incomprehensible laugh, and it issued from the mouth of that shining golden Archer. Faced with such a grave insult, Saber's face flushed angrily. The thing most precious to her had been ridiculed by Archer.

"... Archer, what do you find so funny?"

Ignoring Saber's wrath, the golden Heroic Spirit replied brokenly as he guffawed. "Calling yourself a king, praised by all —one like you could have 'regrets'? Ha! Of course it was funny. Saber! You're the world's best jester!"

Beside Archer, who was laughing uncontrollably, Rider creased his brow as he stared at Saber with worry in his eyes.

"Hold on, hold on. King of Knights, you want to deny the history which you have created?"

Saber had never doubted her own ideals, and of course would not be stopped by Rider's question.

"That is right. Why do you suspect me? Why do you laugh? The country to which I sacrificed my life as king had perished. Is it wrong for me to grieve?"

Another burst of laughter from Archer answered her.

"Oi, oi, did you hear that, Rider? This young girl who calls herself the King of Knights is saying something about sacrificing for her country!"

Rider's deepening silence and increasingly gloomy expression was his response. To Saber, it was just as humiliating as being laughed at.

"I don't understand what there is to laugh about. As kings, it is only natural to sacrifice ourselves, and strive to create a better country!"

"No. You're wrong." Rider objected in a firm, rock-like voice. "It's not the king who sacrifices for the nation. The nation and the people sacrifice their lives for the king. You have gotten it backwards."

"What?!" Saber, no longer able to suppress her own anger, shouted loudly. "Isn't that a tyrant's rule? Rider, Archer, you bastards are nowhere near kings! Heretics!"

"True. We are tyrants, and therefore we are heroes." Rider answered without so much as a change in his facial expression. "We take full responsibility for our nations. Saber, listen to me. If a king is not content with his own kingdom, he is a weak ruler. A weak ruler is a worse king to have than a tyrant!"

Unlike Archer, who had ridiculed her all this time, Rider rejected her on the basis of her ideals. Saber's brows narrowed as she retorted sharply.

"Alexander, you . . . Your own empire—it became four separate warring factions that quickly disappeared into the sands of history. Have you no regrets at such an end? If you could redo it, you would want to save your motherland . . . don't you think about that?"

"No." Raising himself to his full height, the King of Conquerors met Saber's furious gaze with his own. "No, I do not. If my generals and I have acted to cause the eventual demise of my own nation, I will accept it as it is! Yes, I will grieve. Yes, I will shed tears. But I will not have a single regret!"

"... What?"

"Don't you dare suggest something as silly as attempting to rewrite history! Such idiotic actions are an insult to all who lived during my time!"

In response to Rider's haughty declaration, Saber shook her head.

"What you speak of is merely the glory of a simple-minded fighter. The people wish not for such things. Salvation would be their prayer."

"You're saying they want the king's salvation?" Rider shrugged as he laughed. "I don't get it! What's the point of such a useless thing?"

"That is the true worth of a king!" This time, it was Saber's turn to answer arrogantly. "A correct governance, a lawful society —all subjects would wish for them."

"Are you a slave to this 'correctness', then?"

"You could say that. The only one fit to rule is one who would willingly give themselves up for an ideal." The young King of Knights nodded without the slightest hesitation. "Through the king, the people can understand law and order. The king should not express something that would disappear upon the king's death, but rather something more precious."

At Saber's firm proclamation, Rider sighed deeply, with a display of pity. "That is not a path taken by a human being."

"Correct. As king, we cannot hope for a normal life." To become the perfect ruler, the embodiment of those ideals, she was willing to give up her body and discard her emotions. The life of that young woman whose name was Arturia was changed

completely the moment she pulled that sword out of the stone. From then on, she became a legend of victory, a synonym of praises and dreams. Within the pain and disappointment was the radiance of victory; an unchangeable ideal which still supported her sword arm.

"King of Conquerors! A king like you could never understand my own beliefs! You're nothing but a bully who was blinded by his own desires!" Saber shouted sternly.

Rider's eyes immediately widened as he answered in response. "A desireless king is no better than a flower vase!" His loud roar, issuing from his gigantic body, made him appear all the more fearsome.

"Saber, you just said that one needs to sacrifice for one's ideals. Indeed. You are some kind of saint, so holy that none could ever hope to come near you. But who would be willing to die for their empty beliefs? And who would think about this so-called saint day and night? You could only comfort the people, but not lead them. The only way to bring country and people upon the right path is to present those desires, and the glory that could be found only in legends." Draining his cup, the King of Conquerors corrected her thus.

"As king, your desires must be stronger than any other. You must be more magnificent, more easily angered than everyone else! He should be both pure and chaotic, a man who was more real than any other man. Only through this could your subjects be impressed by their king, and only through this would the message 'if I was king, such would be my wonder' be imprinted upon their hearts."

"Such a way of kingship . . . where on earth is the justice?"

"It does not exist. Justice is unnecessary in the principles of a king. That is exactly why we bear no remorse."

He was too adamant in his opinions, and Saber was already uncontrollably angry. Though they speak from the same basis—for their people, their ideals were too far apart. One side prayed for peace. The other dreamed about prosperity. The king who suppressed the chaos of war and the king who stirred up the chaos of war—there was no way their ideals could have been the same. Rider smiled as he continued bluntly.

"King of Knights. Your justice and ideals might have saved your people and country for a time, and thus your name was praised to this day, mmm? Although, those lives you saved and their eventual end—you do know what happened at the end, right?"

"What . . . did you say?" The sight of the bloodstained sunset hill was once again reignited in Saber's brain.

"You wanted only to save your subjects, yet you have never guided them. They do not know the king's wishes. You ignored your lost subjects, yet you yourself pretended to be saintly, drunk in your own narrow views. You were not a good king. You only wanted to become someone who took care of the people. You're just a little girl who spun a cocoon around yourself in order to become that idealized view."

"I . . ." There were many things she wanted to say in retort. Yet each time she opened her mouth, she could only see in her mind the site she witnessed at Camlann. Bodies were everywhere. Blood ran like a river. There lay her subjects, friends, and loved ones. As she pulled out that sword from the stone, she knew about the

prophecy. She knew that she was destined to fail, and she already understood.

But . . . why . . .? Witnessing the sight, she felt surprised. She could do nothing but pray. A magus had once prophesied that it was nearly impossible to go against fate. Yet, she still wondered if she could bring about a miracle. A dangerous idea occupied Saber's thoughts. If she was not England's savior, but rather a tyrant who ravished England . . . The chaotic world would only become more chaotic. That was not her way of kingship. She would never make that choice as Arturia. But if she had really done that . . . in comparison to Camlann, which one was more tragic?

Suddenly, she felt a chill on her spine. The chill brought her back to reality. It was Archer's look. The golden servant had left them alone since Saber had started arguing with Rider, sitting at a corner and drinking quietly. His deep-red pupils were studying her, but she did not know when.

He said nothing, and one could not judge his intent from his gaze. But there was something lascivious in that gaze. It was like a snake crawling up her body, bringing humiliation and unease.

"Archer, why are you looking at me?"

"Ah, I am merely studying your annoyed expression." Archer's smile was surprisingly gentle, but at the same time, fearsome. "It is like a virgin on whom flowers are being scattered as she lay on the bed. I like it."

"You bastard."

For Saber, this was ill-forgiven mockery. She threw her cup down without hesitation, and a sound could be heard from the

sheath of the invisible sword. But what made the other two change their expressions in the next moment was not her threatening attitude. Moments later, Irisviel and Waver also felt the change in the air. Though unseen, they could feel the thickly laden murderous intent through their skin. Strange white creatures emerged in the center of the moonlit court. One after the other, their pale white visages bloomed as they appeared. The paleness was the color of cold, dry bone. Skull masks and black cloaks. The empty center court was soon surrounded by this strange group.

Assassin . . . Rider and Waver were not the only ones who knew they were still alive; Saber and Irisviel had also learned of it from their conversation with Kiritsugu on warehouse street. The one slain in the Tousaka residence was not the only Assassin. There were many of them—an unnatural number of Assassins participated in this Heaven's Feel. They all wore masks and were clad in black robes, and their body sizes differed as well. Some were gigantic, some were slim, and some were short as children, while some were women.

". . . Is this is your doing, Archer?"

Archer shrugged innocently. "Who knows, I have no need to understand the thoughts of curs."

For such a number of Assassins to have gathered, the command could not have come from Kirei alone. Perhaps this was the plan of his mentor, Tousaka? Archer had grudgingly recognized the Master who had declared fealty to the King of Heroes. However, what Tousaka had done now was extremely displeasing. Rider was the host of the banquet, and Archer had

provided the wine. What on earth is the meaning of this? Such an action would indirectly tarnish the reputation of the King of Heroes. Did Tokiomi not understand this much?

"Mmm . . . so much confusion!" Waver sighed rather desperately as he watched the opponents approach. Incomprehensible! This had far exceeded the regulation and limits of the Heaven's Feel.

"What is the meaning of this?! Assassins appearing one after the other! There was supposed to be only one Servant of each class!"

Watching the awkward expressions of their prey, the Assassins laughed evilly. "You're correct. We are all acting as one Servant, and each individual is only a shadow of the whole."

Waver and Irisviel could not understand that Kirei Kotomine's Assassin existed in such a strange manner. The Old Man of the Mountain—among the people who succeeded the name of Hassan-I Sabbāh, only one had the power to switch bodies. Unlike other Hassans, he did not need to modify his body in any way. It could also be said that there was no purpose in doing so; though average strength-wise, his mind was able to change his body freely. He could employ impressive planning and tactics, understand languages of other countries, identify poisons or set traps. All told, he was a master assassin, able to do everything, switching abilities based on the requirements of his assignments. It was whispered that on occasion, he was even able to call on curious strength and agility, or use illusionary fighting styles that had been long forgotten. He could disguise himself as man or woman, youth or elder—anything. He could stand quite naturally

next to one, undetected. He could even change personality based on the situation, allowing none to guess at his real identity.

No one knew the truth. Hassan may have had a unique body, but he had many different souls. Medical knowledge at the time did not think of multiple personality disorder—as it is defined in modern medical sciences—as an illness.

To Hassan the assassin, it was a source of arcane power. He could call up the multiple personalities within him to use all kinds of different skills and draw upon their knowledge, confusing their opponents or weaving a web of defense, and killing their opponents with unexpected methods that no one could predict. This was the Assassin that Kirei had summoned—The Hundred-Faced Hassan. He was a Servant with one physical body, but a thousand different souls. From this standpoint, they were different souls initially; no longer limited by the physical form now, they were all able to materialize simultaneously into different forms. Of course, their strength was merely the strength of one, and after this split each Assassin could not hope to match the other Heroic Spirits. But each possessed the unique skills of the Assassin class, and they were unparalleled in spying and reconnaisance.

"You mean . . . we've always been watched by these things until today?"

Irisviel murmured painfully, and Saber also shivered unconsciously. Though the opponent was not powerful, they were numerous and were able to sneak up on the group. She was the most powerful Servant, but they were still a considerable threat. The Assassins that normally followed them like shadows had now

called off their Presence Concealment, fearlessly showing their figures. This meant . . .

"They mean business." Saber gritted her teeth as she realized the trap they had unexpectedly fallen into.

This was a group of rabble that relied on strength in numbers. In a frontal assault, there was no way Saber would lose to them. But this was true only if Saber was the only combatant on their side. Right now, Saber had to protect Irisviel. No matter how weak the Assassins were, they were still a threat to humans, and even to Irisviel, a homunculus who could use magecraft flawlessly. Magecraft alone would not stop Assassin; there was no way she would be able to defend herself.

In protecting her companion and fighting at the same time, her most pressing concern was the number of their enemies. With one strike of her sword, how many Assassins could she stop? No, the question was no longer how many she could stop. If she missed even one, that one Assassin might cause grievous injury to Irisviel. The question now was not whether she could stop them, but whether she could do so with a single blow. With the number of Assassins that now surrounded them, it looked incredibly hopeless.

However, from Assassin's perspective, this strategy was their final resort. Even though they fought in a group, this group was still limited in numbers. A tactic involving maximum sacrifice, with a low chance of survival—this method was the equivalent of a suicidal charge, reserved only for final battles. Assassin, a Servant, sought the Holy Grail as well. They could not stand being used as a mere chess piece in Tousaka and Archer's game,

but they could not resist the Command Seal Kotomine Kirei had used. His order was "victory at any cost." They had no choice but to obey.

Though it cheered them to see Saber disturbed and fearful, she was not their real target; that would be Rider's Master. Though Rider had a powerful Noble Phantasm, the destruction it delivered was unidirectional. If Assassin attacked from all sides, they should . . . no, they *must* be able to strike at the short, wimpy Master. Yes . . . For the King of Conquerors, it was a precarious moment. But why was the large Servant still drinking happily, as if nothing had happened?

"Ri-rider, Oi . . . *Oi!*"

Despite Waver's nervous shouting, Rider did not move. He scanned the Assassins around him, his expression still quite even.

"Hey, kid, don't panic. It's just a few new guests to the banquet."

"How in the world do you see them as guests?!"

Rider laughed wryly and sighed, greeting the Assassins that surrounded him with an idiotically calm expression.

"Fellows, would you relax a little and drop the creepiness? As you can see, you are scaring our friends."

Saber thought she heard him wrong. This time, even Archer's brows creased.

"King of Conquerors. Are you trying to invite them as well?"

"Of course. The king's words should be heard by all. If someone shows up to listen, it matters not if they are friend or foe." Rider said calmly as he scooped a spoonful of the red sake in the barrel and handed it to the Assassins. "Here, don't be shy. If you want to

drink with me, there are cups over there. This wine is as your blood."

Hyunn. The sound of something flying through empty space answered Rider's invitation. Only the handle remained in Rider's hand; the scoop had fallen to the ground, cut off by one of the Assassins. The wine in the ladle spilled onto the grounds of the center courtyard.

Rider lowered his head and stared wordlessly at the wine scattered on the ground. The skull masks laughed in derision.

"Did you hear my words wrongly?" Rider's words were calm, but the tone and intent were clearly changed. Only the two who drank with him earlier could detect it.

"I said, 'this wine is as your blood', did I not? Since you dared to spill it, such are the consequences . . ."

At that moment, a whirlwind roared to life. The wind was scorching hot and dry, eager to consume everything. It did not come from the evening forest, or the castle's court—the way it was roaring, it seemed to come from the desert. Waver spat as he tasted sand in his mouth. Sand! It was really sand that the strange wind brought. This hot sand was not supposed to be here.

"Saber, and Archer, the last question of the banquet—is the king lonesome?"

Rider shouted as he stood in the center of the raging desert wind. His cape danced atop his shoulders. He had already changed back into the proper garb of the King of Conquerors. Archer's mouth moved, and he sniggered. There was no need to answer. He replied with his silence instead. Saber did not hesitate either. To

have her own beliefs shaken would be a flat denial of her days spent as king.

"A king . . . has no choice but to be lonesome!"

Rider laughed. As if in response, the whirlwind grew stronger.

"Wrong, wrong! That answer is as good as no answer! Let me teach you two today what it means to be a true king!"

The mysterious hot wind inverted, and eroded reality. In the strange phenomenon that took place tonight, distance and position had lost its meaning. The raging sandstorm changed all it touched.

"How—How could this . . ."

Waver and Irisviel gasped in surprise. Only those who understood magecraft could understand this phenomenon.

"A . . . Reality Marble?!"

An earth-scorching sun; cloudless, clear skies, stretching to the blurry end of the sandy horizon. Nothing obstructed the eye here. That the Einsbern castle setting could be changed so suddenly meant that this was undoubtedly an illusion that eroded reality. It could be considered the uppermost limit of the miracles of magecraft.

"How could this be . . .? You can materialize the environment inside your mind . . . Could you be—a magus?!"

"Of course I'm not. This is not something I can do alone." Alexander laughed proudly as he majestically stood in the center of wide field stretched from end to end. "This land is the land in which my army once crossed. It is imprinted upon the hearts of each of my warriors who shared in my joys and sorrows."

As the world changed, the positions of the five who were initially surrounded changed as well. The Assassins, originally

surrounding the group, were now moved to one side. On the other side stood Saber, Archer, and the two Masters. In the center, before the Assassins, stood Rider alone . . . but he did not seem to fight alone. Eyes widened as they noticed the mirage-like images that appeared around him. One, two, four . . . There were more and more images, ever-increasing. Their colors became clearer and more solid.

"This world can exist again . . . because it is imprinted upon all of our hearts."

Before expressions of total shock, heavily armed cavalry materialized alongside Alexander. Though their faces and equipment differed, their muscular bodies and mighty chargers boasted a fierceness that could only be found in a true army. Only one person present understood what this meant.

"All of these beings . . . are Servants!" He was the only Master here, and he understood. Alexander's trump card, his true Noble Phantasm, had now appeared before his eyes.

"Behold, my peerless army!"

The King of Conquerors stood before the lines of cavalry and raised both arms to the skies, declaring with immeasurable pride.

"Their bodies may have returned to ash, but their spirits still hear my call! These men are my legendary heroes, my loyal followers! They are my true friends, breaking the rules of space and time to fight once more at my side! They are my treasure among treasures; they are my right to rule! They make up Alexander's mightiest Noble Phantasm—Ionioi Hetairoi!"

An EX-rank, anti-army Noble Phantasm: the consecutive summoning of multiple independent Servants.

The Lord of War, the Maharaorajah, and founders of many dynasties—the peerless array of Heroic Spirits gathered here were only heard of reverently in legends. All the famed warriors standing here had once fought alongside Alexander the Great.

A riderless horse galloped toward Rider. It was a powerful and sleek steed, as impressive as any one of the Heroic Spirits standing before the king. "Long time no see, pal." Rider smiled childishly as he hugged the neck of his horse. She was the legendary charger, Bucephalus. Even the horse of the King of Conquerors had become a Heroic Spirit.

All were speechless in shock and admiration. Even Archer, also possessing an EX-rank Noble Phantasm, was utterly silent at the sight of so radiant an army. These heroes rode alongside their king on the battlefield. Their wager, like the king's, was the king's dream. Not even death could cease their loyalty. The King of Conquerors had turned it into a fitting Noble Phantasm.

Saber was shaken to her core. It was not the strength of the Noble Phantasm that she feared; rather, the Noble Phantasm had shaken the beliefs which she held with such pride. This flawless cooperation . . . A bond with one's subjects becoming a Noble Phantasm . . . The idealistic King of Knights had pursued this her whole life, yet could not obtain this at the end.

"The King lives to the fullest! He needs to live more fully than anyone else! He is a figure of admiration to his people!" Rider's voice boomed as he sat atop his beloved steed. The Heroic Spirits

began smashing their weapons against their shields, shouting in unison.

"He gathered the will of every courageous being! He marched toward that dream and began his long conquest! That is our king! Thus—"

"The King is never lonesome! His wishes are our wishes!"

"Indeed! Indeed! Indeed!"

The majestic cries of the Heroic Spirits pierced the heavens and flew among the stars. Whatever they faced—enemy or fortress—was powerless before the King of Conquerors and his loyal friends. Such was their spirit that they could cross this earth. With this spirit, they could split the very oceans. And thus, the Assassins standing before them were as insignificant as clouds.

"All right, Assassin. Let us begin." Rider's smiling eyes were full of ruthlessness and cruelty. He no longer cared to hold back against those who ignored the king's words and declined his gift. "As you can see, my preferred battlefield is the plains. Sorry, but if winning is about numbers, I believe I have the advantage here."

The hundred faces of the Hassans had forgotten about the Holy Grail at this moment. Victory and the mission of the Command Seal were meaningless; they had already lost their sense of Servanthood. Some ran away, while others screamed fruitlessly. Yet more stood dumbly, rooted. The panicked mob of skull masks were indeed just a group of rabble.

"Trample them!" Rider commanded without hesitation.

"AaaaLaLaLaLaLaie!" The collective roar of the Ionioi Hetairoi echoed in response. The peerless army that once swept across continents once again thundered across the battlefield. This was

no longer a battle; it was a massacre. A sesame seed would have given more resistance under a grinding mill. Wherever the Ionioi Hetairoi rode, no trace of Assassins remained. Only a faint smell of blood remained in the air, and some dust that was quickly blown away.

With a cheer of victory, the warriors gave dedication and praise to the king. Their mission completed, they returned to spirit form and disappeared in the distance. The bounded field generated by these heroes likewise disappeared. They vanished like a popped bubble, and the night air returned. Once again, they were standing in the courtyard of the Einsbern castle. The white, clear moonlight was silent, and nothing remained in the night air. The three Servants and two magi returned to their seats, raising their cups once more. Only the ladle, sliced to bits by a dirk, stood as testimony to all that happened.

"How disappointing."

As though nothing had happened, Rider quietly murmured to himself as he finished the wine in his cup. Saber said nothing, and Archer smirked with the slightest hint of an unsatisfied expression.

"Indeed, no matter how weak the curs, it must have been quite the effort for you, the king, to take down this many, mm? Rider, you're really a thorn in my eyes."

"Of course. Let's get this straight. We must have a match to see who is the better, at any cost."

Not offended in the least, Rider smiled as he stood up.

"Anyway, all we wanted to say has been said, right? Let us stop here for today."

But Saber was still dwelling on Rider's words, and she would not let him off so easily.

"Hold on, Rider. I'm not finished—"

"Be quiet."

Tensely, Rider stopped Saber's comment.

"Tonight, we have had a banquet among kings. However! Saber, I do not recognize your kingship anymore!"

"Do you still plan to mock me, Rider?"

Saber's tone carried great irritation, but Alexander only looked at her with pity. Pulling out his sword, he waved it in the air. With a sudden thunderous roar, a chariot drawn by divine bulls pulled up. Though not nearly as impressive as Ionioi Hetairoi, it was still wonderous to behold.

"Hurry up, kid. Climb on."

"..."

"Oy, kid?"

"Ah? Ah ... um ..."

Ever after he witnessing Assassin's effortless defeat, Waver's heart was strangely shadowed. It was his first time seeing such an irregular, abnormal Noble Phantasm; such a reaction was natural. He had seen his Servant's true strength for the first time. Unsteadily, Waver crawled onto the chariot. Alexander gave Saber one last glance as he began to speak with sincerity.

"Know what, little girl? It would be better for you to wake quickly from that painful dream of yours. Or the day might come when you'll lose even a hero's self-respect. The kingship you spoke of—that was just a spell you put upon yourself. That is all."

"No, I—"

Ignoring Saber's final retort, the chariot flew to the skies flashing with lightning. The only thing left was the sound of thunder as the chariot disappeared in the eastern skies.

Saber, her last words interrupted, felt she had been wronged. She could not drop her unreasonable sense of worry. No mercy, no ideals; a king whose rule, based on violence, aimed only to fulfill his own desires. Yet he had amassed such a group of such loyal followers who were willing to swear an unbreakable fealty to him. This was anathema to the King of Knight's ideals. She could not accept such beliefs. Yet she could not treat his words as mere jest either. The time will come when she would force him to take these words back—these thoughts bothered Saber like a thorn in her side.

"Ignore him, Saber. All you have to do is follow your own beliefs." This time, the one who interjected was Archer, who had been mocking her all this time. Hearing such strange words of encouragement, Saber answered icily.

"You were mocking me moments ago, yet you flatter me now, Archer?"

"Of course! Your way of kingship is the only way, without a fraction of an error. Of course, to your frail body, it must be such a great burden. Such bitterness, such tangled webs . . . I could not help but to sincerely comfort you."

His appearance was proper, his voice was serious, but his expression and tone held limitless lust and malice. As long as this golden Servant existed, Saber would never have a single moment of confusion. Unlike Rider, whom she could communicate in words with, Archer was an unforgivable enemy.

"Stay on your path of righteousness, Saber, and clown along. I like it. Make me happy, Saber, and maybe I'll reward you with the Holy Grail?"

The white jade goblet shattered in Archer's hands.

"Rider has already left, and the banquet is long over. Archer, leave now or draw your sword."

Saber's waving sword, though invisible, unleashed a powerful pressure. Archer, broken goblet in hand, showed no discernable change in expression; he was exceptionally brave or exceedingly stupid.

"Oy, oy. Did you know that countless nations have been destroyed because of this cup? Ah, whatever. Punishing a jester like you is pointless anyway; it is not fitting behavior for a king."

"Silence! I'll warn you only once. Next time, I'll cut through you mercilessly!"

Ignoring Saber's warning, Archer smiled as he stood up.

"Try harder, O King of Knights. Sometimes, I think you're still pretty cute."

With those last words, Archer vanished into spirit form. As if waking from a dream, the courtyard, now barren of that golden radiance, was noticeably empty. In this manner, the curtains fell on another battle; calling it a battle would be nuanced, but it was indeed a conflict. To fulfill their beliefs of kingship, the Heroic Spirits had many reasons to wager their lives on.

As her opponents disappeared, Saber stood silently alone in the courtyard. The scenario was familiar to Irisviel—was not the selfsame shadow present at yesterday's skirmish at the warehouse street as well? Yet today, there was not a single shred of

satisfaction upon her face even after the defeat of such powerful opponents. The thoughtful, yet depressing expression unsettled Irisiviel.

"Saber . . ."

"When I was shouting at Rider . . . If he were willing to stop and listen to me, what would I have said?" It was unclear who the question was addressed to. Saber turned around and smiled dryly, perhaps laughing at herself.

"I remember—'King Arthur could not understand the heart of others.' A knight who once left me told me that."

". . ."

"Perhaps it was the thoughts of a particular knight from among the Knights of the Round Table."

Irisviel shook her head as she spoke to Saber: "Saber, you're the king of ideals. Your Noble Phantasm is proof of this."

Like Rider's Ionioi Hetairoi, Saber likewise possessed Excalibur. If the King of Conqueror's Noble Phantasm was his ability in command, then the King of Knight's Noble Phantasm was the physical realization of her ideals. The aura of pride it exhibited was undeniable.

"Of course I wanted to become an ideal; to make no mistakes, to be blameless, I had no emotions and never expressed my feelings." Giving up herself for the duty of the king—a far more distant road than the limitless desire of the King of Conquerors.

"As long as the battle could be won, and the administration was just, I was a perfect king. I needed no understanding. Even if they thought I was arrogant and lonesome, I suppose that was also the

rightful expression of the king. But why . . . why am I not proud of my own beliefs like Rider?"

Irisviel finally understood Saber's confusion. King Arthur met with a tragic end, forsaken by everyone. She was unable to gain her followers' sincere admiration. The honor of the King of Knights was tarnished.

"Saber . . . even if fate cannot be avoided, no one claimed it is set in stone."

After a moment of silence, Irisviel finally spoke.

"What do you mean?"

"Fate is not predestined. The turn of the world, luck, and many unexpected events determine the final shape of destiny. The destruction of the King of Knights was not destined. Thus, you should strive for the Holy Grail."

". . . Yes. You're right."

The king's magician had told her that if she pulled out the Sword of Destiny, she would walk the path of unavoidable destruction. Even so, she had no regrets. She knew, but she had not understood its meaning. Even if she could not believe in hope, she still wanted her hope to be true. When she witnessed the predicted end of the prophecy, that was when she could no longer accept reality, when all she had was prayer and despairing hope. She wondered if she had made a mistake along the way. The choice she had made—there should have been a more appropriate ending . . . The very thought made her a Heroic Spirit and guided her to the Holy Grail of Fuyuki.

"Thank you, Irisviel. I almost lost what was most precious to me." Saber nodded, her eyes as peaceful and clear as before,

shining with confident radiance. "I will get no answers to my deeds as king here; I should be asking the Holy Grail. That is why I am here."

"That's right." Irisviel sighed in relief. The sad expression of thoughtful reminiscence on her face did not suit the proud King of Knights. She should look as one who followed her own beliefs confidently. That shining sword also promised Irisviel's victory.

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Back at Miyama, the underground basement of the Tousaka manor was surrounded in bitter, stifling silence.

"That Noble Phantasm of Rider's; what was its power level?" Speaking heavily into the communicator, Tokiomi asked Kirei.

"The same rank as Gilgamesh's Gate of Babylon: EX-rank." A sigh followed.

As he had anticipated, Assassin's sacrifice was not in vain. At least he was able to figure out Rider's trump card. If he had no knowledge against Rider as he fought him, Tousaka would not be able to do a thing against that super Noble Phantasm. The only thing that exceeded their expectations, was the rank of the Noble Phantasm. Even with prior knowledge, could he find a way to defeat it?

As before, he thought of his own Servant, Archer's Noble Phantasm was the strongest. However, a Servant with the same level as Archer's own had appeared unexpectedly, beyond his expectations. Now, a rare sense of regret floated foremost into Tokiomi's thoughts. Perhaps throwing away the playing piece

called Assassin was a deadly mistake. Against a dangerous opponent like Rider, it may have been better to send a scout to gather information instead of risking a frontal assault. If ever Rider and his Master were separated, he might even be able to employ assassination . . .

". . . Idiot." Tokiomi shook his head. It was his own fault. This was not a strategy, only his random thoughts. The situation was not desperate yet. Many things still cheered him. Alexander's Master was only a third-rate magus. If the one who summoned him was Lord El-Melloi, the situation would have been much worse; the Servant's ability parameters were heavily dependent on the Master's ability. Did he not also take advantage of the result of Kayneth's dispute with his student? It looks like all the luck in this fourth Heaven's Feel was on his side.

Time for business. Tokiomi took his wooden staff, stroking it calmly yet firmly. His life's work was in the gigantic gem framed near the handle, holding within a lifetime's worth of prana.

"Assassin is no more; Kirei, you should not be saving your own strength any more."

"I understand." Kotomine Kirei's quiet yet deep voice came across from the other side. Though he had lost his Servant, this first-rate student and Executor still possessed great combat ability. Now, because he could no longer command Assassin, he had no need to disguise himself—it was time for him to unleash his own abilities. As predicted, the second part has begun. Based on information gathered by Assassin, he would mobilize Gilgamesh and begin his assault. As for defeating Rider, he would slowly find a way to accomplish that.

Finally, it was time to step out of his territory and onto the battlefield. Silently enduring the pains of the Magic Crests, Tokiomi stood up from his chair.

~Volume 2 end~

Postface

Higashide Yuuichirou

Everyone has waited long for the publication of this second volume of *Fate/Zero*. Unlike the small struggles of the prequel, in this volume of increasingly intense battles, the Grail War has finally officially begun.

The many stories surrounding Kiritsugu's destruction of an entire building, mentioned in the glossary of *Fate/Stay Night*, and the constant mentions of the Fourth Heaven's Feel in *Fate/Hollow Ataraxia*, have gradually come to light.

For instance, in *Fate/Hollow Ataraxia*, Saber said something like; *Do you still remember?*

"U-unless this is the octopus Shirou and the rest were talking about? I can't imagine that sort of magic fish!

. . . What? You mean that planar monster that cannot be cut up in any way? You would go so far as to make me eat that?!" (From *Fate/Hollow Ataraxia*)

Needless to say, what is mentioned here is the battle against Caster in this volume. Then, "actually, Saber, what you ate was

what actually came out from inside that thing." If one were to say this, she would certainly be very angry. It would definitely give her a huge shock. Many other stories related to the *Fate* series will certainly incite interest when readers reach that part of the game again after finishing this book in its entirety.

Though this should not be said in front of readers, I am sure everyone knows this already—the ending of *Fate/Zero* has already been decided. Only Emiya Kiritsugu survives, and all the rest are sacrificed.

Though Saber emerges victorious, she was unable to obtain the Grail. Not only that, under the coercion of the Command Seals, she destroyed the Grail that carried her wishes with her own hands . . . leaving only the fact of 'Fuyuki's greatest catastrophe.' This is an extremely cruel story with absolutely no salvation.

The endings of *Fate/Stay Night* are many—tragic endings, happy endings—I believe that players should already understand that *Fate/Zero* is not like that.

This is a story from the past which precedes *Fate/Stay Night*. Shirou became troubled in the *Fate* route because of what happened in the past; what has already happened, no one has the ability to change. There is only one ending—this cannot be altered. This means that the many charming characters who debuted in Volume 2 of *Fate/Zero* are fated for eradication.

A story with only tragic outcomes—perhaps there are some who are not willing to continue reading. After all, some would rather keep their distance, as far as heavy-hearted, depressing stories go.

But, but—Even if you are like that, I believe you will wish to continue reading *Fate/Zero*. Because here is Emiya Kiritsugu, the Emiya Kiritsugu that even Shirou, after abandoning his dreams, and Saber, who had only seen Kiritsugu's callous magus side, had not seen.

To allow everyone in this world to be happy—here is Emiya Kiritsugu, the man with such foolish dreams. Here is Emiya Kiritsugu, harboring the terrible fear of losing the person he loves. Here is Emiya Kiritsugu, the extraordinarily formidable magus.

So you probably will want to read on. For instance, Emiya Kiritsugu's last words in *Fate/Stay Night*: "Ahah—don't worry."

I want to read this line.

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Other than this, in Fate/Zero there are many other mysteries.

For example, in this volume, there was no mention of the battle between Alexander and Gilgamesh; against these two absolutely strong Servants and their powerful Noble Phantasms, how should Saber deal with them?

And the unidentified Black Knight—what is his (her?) origin? Why would it suddenly attack Saber?

And what endings will come of the goings-on between Matou Kariya, Tousaka Aoi and Tousaka Tokiomi?

(Of course, it will definitely be a tragic ending.)

We already know all the endings in *Fate/Zero*.

But we do not know the paths that lead to this ending. And of these warriors fated to destruction, we do not know—how they

fight, how they perish, even how they fall. Those who wish to solve these mysteries, those who wish to know their paths, those with similar thoughts, will probably want to keep reading *Fate/Zero*.

one more thing.

Fate/Zero is really a story of salvation.

Even though the fourth Heaven's Feel ends in a tragic outcome, Emiya Kiritsugu saved Emiya Shirou. And Saber being summoned as Emiya Shirou's Servant is also a fate that has already been determined. Emiya Kiritsugu, tormented, despairing, then dying after his salvation by the existence of Emiya Shirou—even if this is mocked by his mortal enemy Kotomine Kirei, it should probably count as a happy ending.

For Emiya Kiritsugu, who walks toward an end of darkness and despair, or for the other magi and Servants who joined Heaven's Feel carrying many different wishes—I implore them, and the readers, to witness the process of this entire event.

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Then, before I wrote this postface.

Urobuchi Gen said to me, "Before writing the postface, what about looking at the manuscript of Volume 2?" Full of joy, I immediately agreed: "Greatly honored to be allowed to read this work. Please let me read it, let me read it at once." Then I, at maximum happiness, immersed myself in the joy of reading.

Rather than a privilege for those involved, this could be sort of compared to a Noble Phantasm. This is a sort of Noble Phantasm

by the name of 'dastardly fantasy'. In this present moment, I am experiencing this thrill of 'reading' before anyone else. Ohoho, kekeke. Just like Waver in Volume 1.

So I very solemnly guarantee to the readers, in Volume 2 there will definitely be stories that are even more satisfying. Readers will probably have thoughts similar to mine after reading. Indeed, *Fate/Zero* has brought us even more powerful new shockwaves. That is—

Alexander, not wearing pants—

/*is dragged offstage, end*/

The typeface used almost exclusively throughout this volume is Aldus LT Std, designed by Herman Zapf and published by Adobe Type.

The novel title is set in Palatino LT Std, from the same designer, to which Aldus LT forms a lovely book weight text face companion.

Both typefaces feature letterforms based on the humanist fonts of the Italian Renaissance. The broad-nibbed strokes lend calligraphic grace, and the text proportions make for easy reading at normal distances.

Body text is set at 12pt/16pt, while footnotes are set at 8pt/10pt.